

COVID-19 and Fire Safety in the UK

March 2021



Introduction

In the last 12 months the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated the world with the necessary, but disruptive nature of lock-downs, restrictions, and preventative measures impacting life as we know it.

Across the UK we have seen the closure of entire industries, mass-furlough, working from home, empty buildings, and quiet playgrounds. It is hard to think of a sector that hasn't been impacted by COVID-19. However, one thing that has remained is the importance of ensuring precautionary and preventative fire safety measures are installed to protect life and property.

Regardless of the storm around us, it is essential that businesses continue to ensure that their fire safety is not only compliant, but adapted to facilitate the added challenge of the on-going pandemic.

This report aims to look at the impact of COVID-19 and gain insight from those working in the fire safety industry ahead of the potential reopening of businesses and buildings across the UK.



A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a final flourish.

Andy Collinson, CEO at Geofire

Executive Summary

The results collected within this report have been used to gain an insight into the fire safety industry and understand the opinions and thoughts of the people who work within it. The aim of this report is to raise awareness about the importance of ensuring fire safety compliance as businesses prepare to reopen their buildings to the public.

The target audience of the survey was those who have worked in the fire safety industry during the pandemic. A sample of the job titles included: Fire Risk Assessor, Fire Safety Enforcement Officer, Fire Door Auditor, Fire Inspector, H&S Advisor, Fire Alarm Commissioning Engineer, Fire Program Manager, and Fire Safety Consultant.

Thank you to all who took the time to respond and share their thoughts and experiences.

About Geofire

Geofire, home of Agrippa and Salamander, began life in 1972 and has, since then, been designing and manufacturing a wide range of innovative fire safety technology, including approved fire door holding and closing devices.

The Agrippa wire-free, fire door holders and closers offer an alternative, battery-powered solution. The devices 'listen and learn' the sound of the fire alarm, closing the door upon hearing the pre-recorded sound of the alarm.

The radio controlled Salamander products are wire-free and suitable for BS7273-4 critical actuation (category A). The Salamander products are triggered by radio waves from a central controller connected to the existing fire panel.

Each fire door holder and closer connects wirelessly to minimise disruption to the building. The hard-wired range of fire door devices are ideal for new builds, as they are wired into the control panel and connected to the building's fire detection system.

We export and distribute our products across the world through an extensive network of distributors and approved installers. Visit our website to find out more.

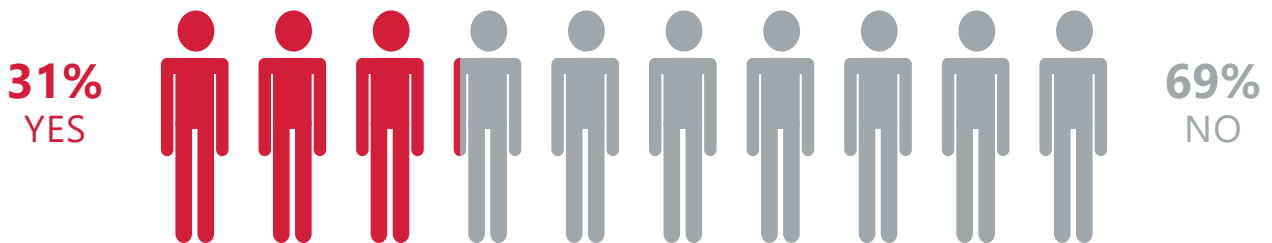




Results

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- 3

Do you think the priority of fire safety has been negatively impacted since the start of the pandemic?



The risk that a fire presents to life and property must remain a key priority as the UK responds to the pandemic. Despite disruption to normal practice, property and business owners should consider that there has not been a change to fire safety legislation requirements. These are not only still applicable, but are being actively enforced.

Results found that 31% of respondents agreed that the priority of fire safety had been negatively impacted since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The key themes presented in the comments suggested that this may have been a result of loss of revenue, budget cuts, and the prioritisation of COVID safety.

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Unfortunately, there is a lack of understanding about the priority of fire safety among the businesses still and a lack of correct firestopping within the buildings where compartmentation surveys are urgently needed.

Fire Door Auditor

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I don't think it has changed anything to do with fire safety or prevention. Just my opinion.

Fire Marshal

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Do you think COVID prevention measures have had a negative impact on fire safety?



This question was asked to determine if the respondents found that COVID-19 measures had a negative impact on fire safety compliance. This included measures such as; the closing of premises, alterations to buildings, reduced staffing levels, and the maintenance and testing of fire safety systems.

Although the results show that 63% of the sample responded with 'no', when given the opportunity to provide further comments, some of the information did in fact support the statement. One respondent commented: "It is the result of pressure to keep the premises COVID-19 safe, reducing visits and the need to impose social distancing measures".

It is important that infection control measures are not implemented to the detriment of a building's fire safety and that risk assessment and evacuation procedures are reviewed and adapted according to any changes made.

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Yes, I would say it initially had a negative impact.

Fire Engineer

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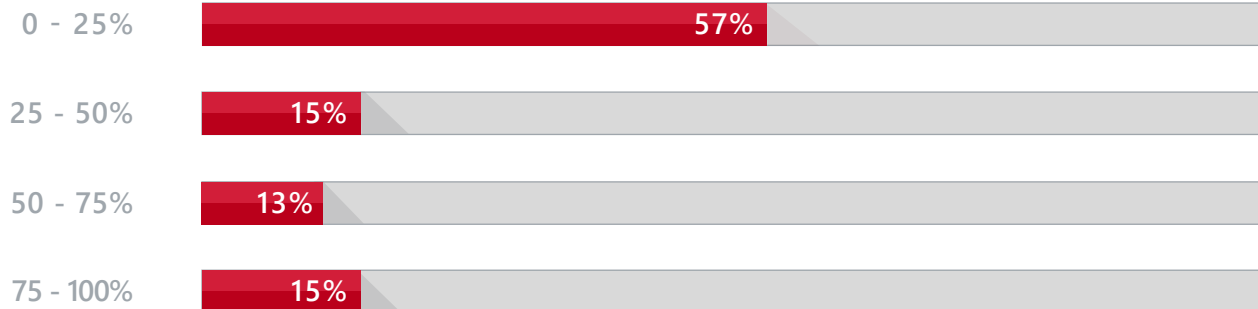
Yes, definitely in the residential sector, more use and abuse.

Fire Consultant

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If applicable, what percentage of site visits have been postponed in the last 12 months?



The results show that on average 29% of site visits were postponed during the last 12 months. As fire safety professionals were classed as key workers during the initial lock down and able to continue essential work and visits, this does suggest that the pandemic has still been a barrier in the completion of fire safety maintenance, servicing, and installation.

Although it is not clear if the visits were eventually rescheduled, almost one third were impacted which suggests a potential backlog of site visits for the coming year.

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A lot of office spaces have been left empty so many buildings all locked up an fire alarm service etc. are forgotten about.

Fire Engineer

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Access to buildings being used for COVID-19 isolation, and fear of the unknown.

Fire Program Manager

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Have you seen an increase in the wedging or propping open of fire doors to help with infection control since the start of the pandemic?



A measure that has been taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is the wedging of fire doors to prevent door handle contact, create one-way systems or improve ventilation. While this may seem like a quick and easy infection control measure to implement, it does present significant challenges to the integrity of a fire safety strategy.

At 53%, over half of the respondents recorded that they had seen an increase in door wedging since the start of the pandemic. This result suggests that there is still a lack of awareness around the importance of fire doors to compartmentalise fire and smoke and protect escape routes.

A fire door must only be held open by an approved hold open device, such as the Agrippa fire door holder and closer, which automatically releases an open door on the sound of a fire alarm.

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Majority of fire doors are being propped open to allow air flow.

Fire Safety Consultant

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Fire will not stop for COVID-19, employers still have an obligation to keep people and premises fire safe.

H&S Advisor

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Do you think financial pressure from the pandemic has made businesses less likely to carry out fire safety maintenance/improvements?

84%
YES

16%
NO



Unsurprisingly the findings support the global economic uncertainty of COVID-19, with 84% of respondents reporting that they think businesses are now less likely to carry out fire safety maintenance or improvements.

However, when making budget decisions, businesses must consider the real cost of a fire. The Association of British Insurers (ABI) reported that UK businesses made fire property claims of £940m for industrial and commercial properties in 2018, and this only covers what is insurable. Damage, repairs, loss of possessions, and business closure following a fire will all present a high financial cost that far outweighs the cost of maintenance.

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Loss of revenue across the majority of sectors, plus extra spend in COVID safety measures has meant that budgets are both cut and stretched. While the bare bones of fire safety systems are being maintained, the additional measures of disabled refuges and fire alarm solutions for deaf people etc. are being postponed or de-prioritised.

Sales Consultant

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Summary

31% think the priority of fire safety has been negatively impacted since the start of the pandemic.

37% of respondents think COVID prevention measures have had a negative impact on fire safety.

29% of site visits have been postponed in the last 12 months.

53% of respondents have seen an increase in the wedging of fire doors.

84% think that financial pressure has made businesses less likely to carry out fire safety related maintenance or improvements.

For product enquiries and sales, contact Steve Kew at stevekew@geofire.co.uk or on 07876 444 633.



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