

Parliamentary Briefing: Housing and Planning Bill

House of Commons: Lords Amendments

28 April 2016



1. Key Messages

- **Electrical Safety First supports the introduction of clauses 121 and 122, and welcomes the Government's support on electrical safety standards**
- Electrical Safety First believe that people in the PRS would be best protected by mandatory checks on electrical installations and supplied appliances in rented homes **every five years**. We are seeking that all tenants across the UK are protected, as is already the case in Scotland. The Welsh Government is expected to bring forward regulations by 2017 and the Northern Irish Government has commenced a consultation.
- **We look forward to working with the Government on the regulations to ensure that they are checks that will take place every 5 years, are to be conducted by competent persons and on how they will be enforced.**
- **Electrical Safety First is a charity committed to reducing deaths and accidents caused by electricity.** Electricity causes more than 20,000 house fires a year – almost half of all accidental house fires. **Every year, around 350,000 people are injured through contact with electricity and 70 people are killed in the UK, this is in comparison with carbon monoxide poisoning, gas leaks, fires and explosions that are responsible for 18 deaths in the past year, and more than 300 injuries.**ⁱ
- **Electrical Safety First believes that people in the PRS would be better protected by mandatory five yearly checks on electrical installations and supplied appliances in rented homes.** In England, whilst it is necessary for landlords to ensure electrical installations are kept in safe working orderⁱⁱ, there is no legal requirement on landlords to ensure that electrical installations are regularly checked and no evidence is required to demonstrate to tenants that the electrics are safe at the commencement of or throughout a tenancy.
- **Privately rented homes and homes built before 1919 are more likely to have a higher risk of fire.** In 2013, one million homes were assessed as having a higher risk of fire and a third of these are in the PRS.ⁱⁱⁱ We believe that electrical safety checks will help reduce these risks.
- A third (35%) of private renters have been in their home for less than a year and 80% in their current home for less than five years.^{iv} **With such a high turnover in the PRS, and with the average tenancy now lasting for around three years, checks on electrical installations are essential; we believe this should be every 5 years.**
- **Our proposals to improve electrical standards in the PRS are not burdensome on landlords nor are they costly.** These proposals are not only about the safety of tenants but also protects a landlord's asset, with electrical checks helping to spot electrical problems before they pose a serious risk to a tenant through electrocution and to the property by reducing the risk of electrical fires.
- Our campaign for mandatory electrical safety checks is supported by several high profile organisations including the **Association of Residential Letting Agents (ARLA)**,

Shelter, Crisis, Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), London Fire Brigade and British Gas.

2. Electrical Safety in the Home

- Deaths in Great Britain caused by **electrical fires are, on average, 56 per year**, with 18 deaths caused by an electrical distribution fault in the home. Within this subset the biggest single cause of death **is faulty cabling**.^v
- London Fire Brigade figures indicate that in 2013-14 there were 253 fires in London where the Consumer Unit was the source of ignition – **this equates to around 5 fires every week in London alone**.^{vi}
- Electrical safety in the PRS is being left behind other important safety areas, such as gas, carbon monoxide and smoke alarms. **We believe that there should be greater parity between each of these, particularly given that electricity causes half of the fires in domestic properties.**
- Housing is classed as non-decent if it fails to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard, meaning properties that are not warm enough or are in a state of disrepair or do not have modern facilities. Poor electrical safety is a particular concern for our older population - nearly two thirds of properties occupied by couples over 60 do not meet basic electrical safety standards.^{vii}
- Although accidental fire deaths in the home in 2013/14 were at an historic low, over half of fatalities were aged 65 or over.^{viii}
- Of those responding to the Department of Communities and Local Government's own consultation on the PRS, 84% believed that mandatory electrical checks in the PRS were needed, yet the Government decided not to act.^{ix}
- The Local Government Association has publicly supported the need for mandatory electrical safety checks in the PRS in order to reduce the risk of electrical fires in the home.^x Electrical Safety First very much welcomes the positive contribution of local government to this important issue.

3. Protection for tenants by the provision of electrical safety checks

- In 2013, there were 23.3 million dwellings in England, the majority of which (19.2 million) were in the private sector. In 2013-14, 19% (4.4 million) of households were renting privately, up from 18% in 2012-13 and 11% in 2003.^{xi} **We believe that these people's housing arrangements, individually, should be seen as a consumer issue and that they have a right to live in an electrically safe home in terms of the electrical installations and appliances supplied by the landlord.**
- A third (35%) of private renters have been in their home for less than a year and 80% in their current home for less than five years.^{xii} **With such a high turnover in the PRS, and with the average tenancy now lasting for around three years, checks on electrical installations are essential; we believe this should be every 5 years.**
- The majority of homes (59%) in the PRS were built before 1965 with a third (32%) built before 1919. People that lived in private rented accommodation (2%) and in social housing (2%) were more likely to have had a fire than owner occupiers (1%).^{xiii}

- Private rented homes and homes built before 1919 were more likely to have a higher risk of fire. In 2013, one million homes were assessed as having a higher risk of fire.^{xiv} We believe that electrical safety checks, given DCLG's own statistics on electrical fires and electrical distribution faults in the home, will help reduce these risks. **There does not seem to be any central government strategy to reduce these fires.**
- **Of the homes with a higher risk of fire, just under half (46%) were built before 1919, and one in three (29%) were in the PRS.^{xv}** Therefore, a third of people are at serious risk of fire caused by electrical problems, which cause half of all fires in domestic homes.
- In 2013, the PRS had the lowest proportion of homes with central heating at 83% of all the tenures whereas owner occupied and local authority homes had 94% and 93% respectively with central heating ^{xvi} - this means that people in the PRS will be more reliant on portable or storage forms of electrical heating, which could give rise to greater risk of fires, particularly if electrical installations are not sound. Electrical safety checks every 5 years would help to reduce this risk.

4. Situation with PRS Electrical Fires in London – A regional snapshot

- Data from London Fire Brigade shows that of the fires investigated by the authority, there has been no reduction in PRS fires since 2010. Of those fires investigated, **there were 748 that proved an electrical source of ignition in the London PRS in the last 5 years, but only 97 fire investigations that proved a gas source of ignition.^{xvii} If the government is serious in ensuring a safer PRS, then this issue must be tackled and these figures reduced.**
- Whilst these are statistics that focus on London, we believe that investigative data from throughout the country would show similar trends on electrical fires in the PRS, particularly in other fire authority areas. There is evidence that annual gas checks work in the PRS and we suggest the government takes action with mandatory checks to capture electrical faults before they become dangerous and cause electrical source fires.
- It should be noted that **this data relates to fires investigated by the fire investigation team only – and therefore does not represent all PRS fires caused by an electrical source. Therefore, if all fires were recorded by fire authorities or held centrally by the Department for Communities and Local Government we believe that these figures would be considerably higher.**
- Whilst fires in domestic properties have fallen in recent years, London Fire Brigade's statistics show no reduction in electrical fires in PRS properties, whereas gas figures either remain low or have reduced over the period.

5. Benefits for landlords

- Our proposals to improve housing standards are not burdensome on landlords or costly. This is not only about the safety of tenants but also the protection of property, i.e. a landlord's assets. Regular electrical checks would help to identify electrical faults and problems before they pose serious risk to a person or property.
- The costs of a mandatory 5 year electrical safety check are substantially lower than the current legal requirement for an annual gas check. Electrical Safety First believes that 5

yearly electrical safety checks would cost in the region of £150 every five years, or the equivalent of £2.50 a month – these costs are subject to regional pricing variation.

- In comparison an annual gas check costs around £70 per year, or a minimum of £350 over five years – electrical checks are far more cost effective for landlords and therefore we would argue are not burdensome.
- Recent Government policy has sought to improve fire safety in domestic properties, reducing the incidence of fire and associated injuries and deaths. The Government's fire safety campaign, Fire Kills, which is run in partnership with local fire and rescue authorities and Electrical Safety First, is used to convey important fire safety and behavioural messages to households.
- We believe that more information should be provided to landlords and whilst Electrical Safety First publishes guidance for landlords on how to reduce electrical safety risks in their properties and to protect their tenants^{xviii}, more needs to be done by the government to reduce electrical fires in the PRS.
- The Government has recently come forward with regulation for Smoke and Carbon Monoxide in England setting a precedent for helping landlords ensure their tenants and properties are safe.^{xix} We believe that electricity should also be treated in the same way and that electrical checks be introduced to reduce the fire risks as mentioned above.

6. Benefits for business

- The introduction of mandatory electrical safety checks would have a beneficial impact on small business and supports localism, given that landlords and managing letting agents would be likely to use a locally known and trusted competent person to undertake electrical checks and to undertake any necessary repairs. We believe this mandatory work would help see a reduction in electrical source fires in PRS homes.

ⁱ <http://www.gassafecharity.org.uk/about-us/we-are-gas-safe-charity.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-12-08/217711>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fire-statistics-great-britain-2013-to-2014#history>

^{vi} <http://www.london->

[fire.gov.uk/news/AC1B4F18D05A4D82B52979C6465BBFE5_2006201420_londonerswarnedofpotentialfirehazardlurkingunderthestairs.asp#_VpiHqLaL.Tcs](http://www.london-)

^{vii} <http://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/mediafile/100304187/A-Shock-to-the-System.pdf>

^{ix} https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/412926/150313_Document_1_PRS_property_conditions_govt_response_doc_3_.pdf

^x http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6869714/L14-797+100+Days+Fire_WEB.pdf/280f6b10-03b3-4ee7-a3e2-ae759eabb9aa

^{xi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2013-to-2014-headline-report>

^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} Ibid

^{xiv} Ibid

^{xv} Ibid

^{xvi} Ibid

^{xvii} London Fire Brigade Data on Electrical and Gas Fire Investigation 2010-2015

^{xviii} <http://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guides-and-advice-for-landlords/>

^{xix} <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133439/contents>