

Snapshot Briefing:

Improving Electrical Safety for the Most Vulnerable

Derived from Electrical Safety First's report:

Recharge: Renewing Electrical Safety for Northern Ireland's Homes.

Overview

- **Electrical Safety First is the UK charity committed to reducing the number of deaths, injuries and accidents caused by electricity – which accounts for nearly 60% of all accidental house fires in Northern Ireland each year¹.**
- This briefing provides a summary of the electrical safety challenges faced by older and disabled people in the home. It is based on Electrical Safety First's new '[Recharge](#)' report, which provides a wider review of electrical safety in Northern Ireland's housing and recommendations to help reduce house fires and electrical risks. **Independent research suggests that there would be nearly £9million worth of savings to society annually if electrical hazards in Northern Ireland's housing stock were mitigated².**
- **We found that elderly and disabled people are disproportionately impacted by fires and accidents resulting from electricity in the home.** There are a range of reasons, including mobility issues, living alone and/or in older properties with less safety features, issues with the safety of electrical appliances and access to appropriate guidance, support, and advice. Set against a backdrop of an ageing population and a drive to encourage independent living wherever possible, concerns over electrical safety are likely to grow.
- To improve electrical safety protections, we believe older and disabled homeowners in receipt of specific benefits should be provided with financial assistance **to arrange regular electrical safety checks of their homes and mitigate any hazards found.** More widely we are calling for mandatory checks to be introduced in the rented sectors which would improve protection for all.
- We also recommend the Department of Health **update its Home Accident Prevention Strategy with a particular focus on measures to reduce electrical risks.** Further proposals include the promotion and provision of **life saving Residual Current Devices (RCDs)³** and undertaking more focused and accessible awareness raising campaigns of the electrical safety risks in homes.

¹ <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/what-we-do/our-policies/northern-ireland/statistics-northern-ireland/>

² <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-2016-Infographic-Summary.aspx>

³ An RCD, or residual current device, is a life-saving device which is designed to prevent you from getting a fatal electric shock if you touch something live, such as a bare wire. It can also provide some protection against electrical fires.

Key Issues

- As in other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has an ageing population. Over the next 20 years, the proportion of people aged 65 or over is projected to rise from 16% to 25%⁴.
- 78% of older people own their own homes with many of these built before 1945⁵. These homes are most likely to contain category 1 hazards – those which are deemed to pose a potential safety threat to a person or property. **Our research found that older dwellings are less likely to contain features that can protect from electrical hazards**⁶.
- Those who are described as being ‘permanently sick/disabled or looking after family/home’ in the House Condition Survey are more broadly spread across tenures, with 47% living in social housing, 22% in the PRS, and 31% in the owner-occupied sector⁷.
- Northern Ireland has higher levels of disability than the rest of the UK. 71% of people aged 75 or over have a life-limiting illness and more than one in five of the population (21%) have a long-term health problem or disability which limits their day-to-day activities⁸.
- **Our research found that the elderly and disabled are at higher electrical risk in the home.** Contributing factors include mobility issues, living alone or with inadequate support, lifestyle issues, barriers to accessing advice, information and support, including electrical safety checks, and home adaptation and repair restrictions caused by financial circumstances.
- Older people are more vulnerable to the risks associated with fire. **Between 2016-2019, 90% of those who died in house fires were aged over 50**⁹. Further research has found that of all fatal dwelling fires over a 15-year period, 47% involved people aged over 60¹⁰.
- **Electrical safety has also been found to be one of the greatest concerns of carers and family when leaving a person with dementia on their own**¹¹. The number of people living with dementia in Northern Ireland was estimated to be 19,000. This is expected to rise to more than 60,000 by

4 NISRA: <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=74&themeName=Population>

5 <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

6 <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/media/1260/a-shock-to-the-system.pdf#:~:text=A Shock to the System Electrical Safety in,importance of electrical safety in an ageing society.>

7 <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

8 Northern Ireland Census 2011: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2011-census>

9 <https://www.nifrs.org/nifrs-lowers-people-risk-age-50-older/>

10 NIFRS People at Risk Strategy 2016 -2021 <https://www.nifrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/NIFRS-People-at-Risk-Strategy-2016-2021.pdf>

11 George Holley-Moore and Jonathan Scrutton. The International Longevity Centre, UK. A Shock to the System: Electrical Safety in an Ageing Society. Electrical Safety First. 2015



2051¹². Certain symptoms of dementia can greatly increase the risk of injury or death from electricity.

Stakeholder Views

A range of key stakeholders working in the ageing and disability sectors were interviewed to inform our 'Recharge' report. Key concerns included:

- There are several electrical safety issues for dementia sufferers including leaving cookers on and unattended, thereby increasing the risk of fire.
- There is a concern that rogue traders may be taking advantage of the elderly and other vulnerable groups. It was also noted that, traditionally, male partners took responsibility for electrical problems in the home, **so older women living alone may well be a high-risk group who are particularly vulnerable to electrical safety risks.**
- Following the Grenfell Tower fire, concerns were expressed over electrical safety and those surveyed saw a need for more advice on **the safe use of electricity and electrical appliances.** It was noted that, comparatively, **there was more awareness of government advice and information on gas safety.**
- Difficulties with electrical equipment were also noted. These ranged from reaching electrical sockets to dealing with faulty wiring in a pre-fitted plug.
- **There were also concerns with white goods**, specifically related to their usability and safety. For instance, fridges installed under benches were of concern given the lack of ventilation, and some people reported concerns around the safety of tumble dryers.

Recommendations

- Anyone over pension age who receives pension credit, council tax benefit or housing benefit can receive a free gas safety check from their energy supplier. To help further reduce the number of fires in the homes of the vulnerable, **Government should consider ways of providing a free, five-yearly electrical safety check for those individuals in Northern Ireland that meet these criteria.**

12 George Holley-Moore and Jonathan Scrutton. The International Longevity Centre, UK. A Shock to the System: Electrical Safety in an Ageing Society. Electrical Safety First. 2015

- The Department of Health (DoH) should work with stakeholders to **update its Home Accident Prevention Strategy, with particular focus on measures to reduce electrical risks.**
- The DoH should introduce regulations under Article 30 of the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order, to improve domestic fire safety measures. **This could include specific responsibilities regarding electrical safety during home fire safety checks.**
- **Additional funding to help rectify any electrical hazards found in the homes of disabled and older people should be considered**, where they are unable to fund the work themselves and meet appropriate criteria.
- Given the immediate life-saving benefits they offer, **we recommend Government and relevant agencies support the installation of Residual Current Devices (RCDs).** A Department of Industry and Trade (DTI) report estimates that 20% of electrical fires could be prevented by the presence of an RCD, as well as protecting against fatal electric shock¹³.
- To increase awareness of electrical risk in the home, particularly among older and vulnerable groups, **a range of activities – including the provision of literature and media campaigns – should be undertaken by Government and key stakeholders.** To address stakeholder concerns, there should be a specific focus on kitchen and product safety.

To view and download our full 'Recharge' report and accompanying snapshot briefings, visit our website [here](#). To discuss this work further, please contact Wayne Mackay, Public Affairs Manager, Northern Ireland and Scotland, at: wayne.mackay@electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk or on 07565614410.

13 DTI Report. Consumer Safety Research. Residual Current Devices - added value for home. 1997 safety. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.dti.gov.uk/homesafetynetwork/pdf/rcd.pdf>

