

**CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS
ON
ELECTRICAL SAFETY IN MIXED-TENURE BLOCKS IN SCOTLAND**

A request for initial applications from Electrical Safety First

Electrical Safety First is the leading UK charity dedicated to reducing electrical fires, injuries and damage arising from electricity. Acknowledged by the Government and Industry as the experts in electrical safety, the Charity funds a range of research to support evidence-based policies addressing consumer safety and industry best practice. www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

With recent high-profile fires and electrical product recalls, there has been concern regarding the electrical safety of those living in mixed tenure apartment blocks in Scotland. Electricity is the primary cause of accidental fires in Scottish homes, with tenements – or ‘blocks’ of flats – accounting for a significant number, according to official fire data.

Electrical Safety First aims to commission research that allows us to gain further insight into this pressing issue. The evidence-based data will support effective policy development and suggest or identify measures which mitigate electrical risk for those living in mixed tenure apartment blocks in Scotland.

Outcomes of the research will be shared with national and local government, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, as well as tenants and landlords. We also hope that, should this initial research project fulfil its objectives, additional research funding may be made available. Please note that this initial project has been part-funded by the Scottish Government.

2. CONTEXT

Official data consistently shows that the vast majority – around three quarters - of fires in Scotland’s homes are caused by electricity. We believe that the probability of fire spread and risk to people and property may be exacerbated in high density housing – especially in multi-storey apartments or blocks of flats. In 2019, 47% of domestic electrical fires occurred in flats or tenements and this level has remained constant for the last 6 years.¹ Currently, flats account for 38% of all dwellings in Scotland, with most (24%) located within tenements - the building type with the highest level of disrepair according to the latest Scottish House Condition Survey. Electrical risk in the home can often go unnoticed until it goes wrong, but it goes hand-in-hand with a general lack of maintenance and disrepair.

¹ Electrical Safety First methodology of fire data provided by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in February 2020.



3. KEY ISSUES

The key issues with multi-apartment blocks involve the sheer number of units, potential impact of fire on neighbouring units, diversity of tenure, divergent safety regimes of different tenure types, and the need to identify those tenures most ‘at risk’ from electrical fires and accidents.

Many blocks have a mix of socially rented, privately rented, short term holiday lets and owner-occupied dwellings. All these tenures – and the communal areas and building infrastructure – are currently subject to differing legislation and guidance in Scotland, which means there is no cohesive electrical safety regime for the entire building. At the time of writing, only the private rented sector (PRS) in Scotland is legally required to undertake electrical safety inspections every five years. From 2024, PRS landlords will be required to fit Residual Current Devices (RCDs), which offer protection from serious electrical shock and fire, in all their properties. The Scottish Government has also confirmed it will require social landlords in Scotland to complete five-yearly inspections, to comply with the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, by 2022² The table below summaries the current safety obligations in different tenures and the disparity in electrical safety requirements.

Summary of current safety duties in different tenures

	Social Landlords	Private Landlords	Owner Occupiers	New and Converted Buildings
Fire Detectors	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Periodic Electrical Safety Checks	Yes – by 2022	Yes	No	No
Periodic Gas Safety Inspections	Yes	Yes	No	No
Residual Current Devices	No	Yes (from 2024)	No	Yes

Source: *The Scottish Government*³

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/shqs-technical-guidance-for-social-landlords/>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/factsheet/2016/11/common-housing-quality-standard-topic-papers/documents/topic-paper-2-safety-elements-common-standard-pdf/topic-paper-2-safety-elements-common-standard-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/Topic%2Bpaper%2B2%2B%25E2%2580%2593%2BSafety%2Belements%2Bof%2Ba%2BCommon%2BStandard.pdf>



In 1999, a fire in a 14-storey block of flats in Irvine, Ayrshire, led to important changes to the Scottish Building Regulations in 2005 – making it mandatory for builders to ensure that any external cladding inhibited fire spreading. Consequently, the dangerous cladding which significantly contributed to the severity of the Grenfell Tower fire was eliminated from similarly constructed buildings in Scotland. Such legislative developments can only be commended but it is still a highly reactive approach.

Under Scottish property law owners in tenements have shared responsibility for common works and repairs, and we do not have the equivalent of leaseholders who have overall responsibility for the building. This is recognised as a problem when owners are reluctant to work together and there is no single point of responsibility, and is an issue both for tenement maintenance⁴ and for fire safety measures.

Electrical Safety First wants the research outcomes from this project to provide the basis of a proactive, evidence-based approach to electrical safety in mixed tenure apartment blocks in Scotland. We are particularly keen to determine those tenures and residents most vulnerable to electrical risk. We believe it essential that electrical safety in this sector is addressed proactively, rather than in the wake of a serious incident.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- A review of Scotland's mixed tenure residential blocks, including tenement properties. This will include assessments of building age, maintenance status, tenancy type and demographic, as well as the age and known safety levels of electrical installations and an analysis of the main electricity uses in the home (i.e. heating, cooking etc.)
- An analysis of current electrical safety legislation and guidance for all tenures and communal areas within such apartment blocks for the purpose of developing policy

⁴ <https://www.befs.org.uk/policy-topics/buildings-maintenance-2/>



recommendations to address any gaps or issues arising. This should include a comparison with requirements for domestic gas safety.

- Identification of the key electrical safety risks presented in both individual dwellings and communal areas in mixed-tenure blocks. This will incorporate a brief comparison with other types of dwellings, such as detached and semi-detached properties, and offer policy recommendations to mitigate risk.
- Identification of groups most affected by electrical risk in their home and/or block.
- To consider the economic impact on the public purse which might arise through electrical fire or injury in the home.

5. OUTCOMES, DELIVERY AND TIMETABLE

- An initial scoping document, to confirm and clarify research areas, to be provided before detailed work begins. A brief interim report will be provided at two and four months, with the final report made available at the end of six months.
- Regular liaison updates on progress with the nominated contact at Electrical Safety First. These will be agreed at the commencement of the project.
- Final report, along with a shortened summary version, expected by 31 July 2021.
- Please note that the report will be made publicly available, via our website, in addition to being shared with key stakeholders and influencers. Accessibility of information is important to us.
- Budget Available: £18k.
- It is important that we can disseminate this research to as wide an audience as possible – i.e. via consumer campaigns – as well as share the information with key opinion



formers and policy makers. So ideally, we would like an element of quantitative research, with a sufficiently large dataset to be used for national representation. If this is not possible within your working practice, please state this. There may be potential for liaising with a consumer research organisation, such as YouGov, for this activity.

6. SUBMISSIONS

Initial responses need to include:

- Details of strengths, capacity and expertise of the named researchers to successfully implement the proposed project.
- Evidence of familiarity with existing knowledge/research on the topic.

Deadline date for submissions: 19 February 2021.

Please send your submissions to Wayne Mackay, Public Affairs Manager, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Electrical Safety First, at: wayne.mackay@electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk. To discuss any aspect of your application or the research brief, please email Wayne or call on 07565614410.

