

Landlords' responsibility for electrical safety

The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 requires that a house is:

- fit for human habitation at the commencement of the tenancy, and
- kept fit for human habitation by the landlord.

Each year, however, many people in rented accommodation die and many more are injured by electric shock, and fires started by electricity. The causes of such incidents are varied, but include:

- poorly installed and maintained electrical installations
- inadequate provision for the use of items of electrical equipment, such as hair dryers
- inadequate checks on portable equipment
- inadequate fire alarm systems.

This is the first of a series of articles in Switched On that consider the issues relating to each of these hazards, and provides guidance for landlords on how they and their tenants can avoid them.

Poorly installed electrical installations

An electrical installation consists of all the fixed electrical equipment that is supplied from the electricity meter. It includes the cables that are usually hidden in the building fabric, accessories such as socket-outlets and switches, and the consumer unit that contains all the fuses or circuit-breakers.

Since January 2005, all domestic electrical installation work carried out in England and Wales has been required to comply with the requirements of Part P of the Building Regulations. This legislation requires that:

'Reasonable provision shall be made in the design and installation of electrical installations in order to protect persons operating, maintaining or altering the installation from fire or injury'.

Except for some very minor items of electrical installation work, the mechanism for ensuring that the requirements of Part P have been complied with is for the work either:

- to be notified to a building control body (commonly the local authority building control department) prior to any work being carried out, or
- to be carried out by a business registered with a government-authorised electrical self-certification scheme.

Similar legal requirements exist in Scotland, but not in Northern Ireland. For further information about the legal requirements relating to the safety of domestic electrical installation work, visit the Council's website:

www.electricalsafetycouncil.org.uk

There are many factors that contribute to the making of a 'good' electrical installation. For example, an electrical installation should have:

- adequate socket-outlets for the number of portable appliances likely to be used, in order to minimise the need to use multi-socket adapters
- covers in place to ensure that fingers cannot inadvertently come into contact with live parts. Broken or damaged switches and sockets should be replaced without delay
- RCD protection for those socket-outlets that are likely to be used to supply portable equipment outdoors. An RCD (residual current device) provides additional protection against electric shock
- adequate earthing and bonding arrangements. Earthing ensures that a fuse or circuit-breaker will operate fast enough to clear an electrical fault before it can cause

danger of electric shock or fire, whilst bonding ensures that any electric shock risk is minimised until the fault is cleared

- a sufficient number of circuits to avoid danger and minimize inconvenience in the event of a fault.

Poorly maintained electrical installations

An electrical installation, once installed, cannot simply be ignored. Over time, the installation will deteriorate. Connections can work loose (presenting a fire hazard), people can be heavy-handed whilst plugging in items of equipment, and building and maintenance work can have a detrimental effect on the wiring etc.

Some basic safety checks can easily be carried out by the landlord or agent. These include checks for:

- broken socket-outlets and light switches
- signs of scorching around socket-outlets due to overloading
- overheating of electrical equipment – usually associated with a strong, often fishlike, smell
- damaged cables to portable equipment

A landlord should have a Periodic Inspection and Test Report (PIR) carried out at regular intervals. The interval between reports will depend, amongst other things, on the age and use of the installation, and in some instances (in particular for houses in multiple occupation) on the requirements of the local licensing authority.

However, as an example, the Codes of Practice for Student Accommodation recommends that a Periodic Inspection is carried out at intervals no greater than 5 years.

Additionally, the Electrical Safety Council recommends that every electrical installation is inspected and tested by an electrically competent person on change of occupancy.

For the periodic inspection and testing of existing installations, there are no government-approved schemes in the UK that register competent inspectors. However, the following bodies register businesses that may be competent to carry out such work, although their schemes may not cover the entire UK:

British Standards Institution

Phone: 01442 278 577
www.kitemarktoday.com

ELECSA Ltd

Phone: 0870 749 0080
www.elecsa.org.uk

Electrical Contractors' Association

Phone: 0207 3123 4800
www.eca.co.uk

NICEIC Group Ltd

Phone: 0870 013 0382
www.niceic.com

NAPIT Registration Ltd

Phone: 0870 444 1392
www.napit.org.uk

SELECT

Phone: 0131 445 5577
www.select.org.uk

Before selecting a particular business, it would be advisable to check with their registration body that the business is approved and registered for undertaking periodic inspection and reporting work.

There may be occasions when a periodic inspection is carried out by an electrician or installer who is not registered with one of the above-mentioned registration bodies. Where this is the case, the responsibility for ensuring that the electrician or installer is competent to undertake the work rests with the person selecting the particular person or business.

“ A new leaflet produced to help landlords find competent electrical installers can be downloaded free of charge from the Council's website ”

