

TOOLBOX TALK

# Fire safety toolbox talk

About seven minutes · CDM 2015, regulations 29 to 32

SITE

DATE

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WHY IT MATTERS

HSE estimates there are hundreds of fires on construction sites each year. Some are small and put out with one extinguisher. Some take the building, the neighbours and the job with them. The difference is usually what was stacked near the heat, and how quickly somebody noticed.

A building under construction or refurbishment burns faster than a finished one. The timber is exposed, the insulation and packaging are stacked where they were delivered, the fire doors are not hung and the alarm may be a whistle. The people inside may be on an upper floor with one staircase. This talk is about keeping fuel and heat apart, and about everyone knowing the way out.

HSE, Fire safety in construction (HSG168), third edition 2022

THE POINTS TO MAKE

- ☐ **Fuel, heat and air**  
A fire needs all three. The air is always there, so we control the other two. Fuel is timber, packaging, foam, paint, solvents, gas and rubbish. Heat is the grinder, the torch, the heater, the lamp, the cigarette and the damaged cable. The job is to keep them apart, all day and especially at the end of it.
- ☐ **Hot work is under a permit**  
Grinding, cutting, welding, soldering, torch-on felt and heat guns all count. Before any of it starts, the permit is signed, anything that burns is cleared from the area, from under it, from the far side of the wall and from any gap where sparks could get in, and the right extinguisher is beside the work, not in the van.
- ☐ **The fire watch stays behind**  
Sparks and hot slag sit and smoulder in dust, insulation and voids long after the tool is switched off. Somebody watches the area while the work is on, through breaks, and for at least an hour after it finishes, then checks it again two hours later. All hot work finishes two hours before the end of the working day so both checks happen.
- ☐ **Gas cylinders and flammables**  
Keep the minimum you need for the shift. Cylinders are stored upright, outside, in a ventilated and secure cage, away from the building and from drains. On a roof keep cylinders at least three metres from the burner or boiler, or behind a heat shield. Flammable liquids go in a marked, lockable store, lids on. Gas and solvents not in use go back to the store, not left in the work area overnight.
- ☐ **Waste is fuel**  
Offcuts, pallets, shrink wrap, cardboard and sweepings are the fuel for most site fires, and the first thing an arsonist reaches for. Clear as you go, bag and move waste to the skip or compound, and keep it away from the perimeter fence, the building and any hot work. Burning waste on site is not allowed.
- ☐ **Escape routes and alarms**  
Every floor you work on needs a way down that is clear, signed and lit, and leads straight to the assembly point. Materials stacked in a corridor or a staircase take that route away. Know what the alarm sounds like on this site, where the call points are, and where the fire points and extinguishers are. If a route changes, the signs change the same day.
- ☐ **Extinguishers: which and when**  
Water for wood, paper and fabric. Foam for those and for flammable liquids. Powder for all of those. Carbon dioxide or powder for electrical fires. Never water on burning liquid or live electrics. Only tackle a fire that is small, with a clear exit behind you, and only if you have been shown how. If it does not go out at once, leave.
- ☐ **When the alarm goes**  
Stop work, leave tools and materials, and go by the nearest route to the assembly point. Turn off gas at the cylinder if it is beside you and safe to do so. Do not use a hoist or a lift. Do not go back for anything. Report to the person taking the count and stay until you are told the site is clear.

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TOOLBOX TALK, CONTINUED

Fire safety toolbox talk: do, do not, and the questions

DO

- Get a signed hot work permit before any grinding, cutting, welding or torch work starts.
- Keep the right extinguisher beside hot work, and keep the fire watch on for at least an hour afterwards.
- Store gas cylinders upright, outside, in a ventilated secure cage, and take them back there at the end of the shift.
- Clear waste as you go and keep it away from the building, the fence and any heat source.
- Check the escape route from your floor at the start of the shift and report anything blocking it.
- Know the alarm, the call points and the assembly point for this site before you start work.

DO NOT

- Do not start hot work without the permit, the area cleared and an extinguisher within reach.
- Do not leave hot work unattended, even for a break, and do not finish it in the last two hours of the day.
- Do not leave gas cylinders, fuel or solvents in the work area overnight.
- Do not stack materials or waste in corridors, staircases, doorways or in front of fire points.
- Do not run heaters or lamps near timber, insulation or packaging, or leave them on when nobody is there.
- Do not fight a fire that is bigger than a bin, or one between you and the way out.
- Do not go back into the building after the alarm until the person in charge says it is clear.

ASK THE TEAM

- ? What hot work is on this site today, who holds the permit, and who is the fire watch?
- ? Where are the gas cylinders and flammable liquids kept overnight, and who checks they are back in the store?
- ? What does the alarm sound like here, and where is the assembly point?
- ? If a fire started on the top floor right now, which way would you go, and is that route clear?
- ? Which extinguisher would you pick up for a fire in a grinder cable, and which one would you not?

TO CLOSE

Nobody starts a fire on purpose. Fires start because the sparks landed in a void nobody could see, the cylinder was left by the work because it was raining, or the pile of offcuts was going in the skip tomorrow. Keep fuel and heat apart, keep the way out clear, and when the alarm goes, go. The job can wait. The building cannot be rebuilt around you.

**Record it.** Who gave the talk, where, when, who was there and what was raised. The last page is the record.

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## Fire safety toolbox talk: given and understood

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MANAGEMENT OF HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK REGULATIONS 1999, REGULATION 10: INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYEES

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