

So why don't battery smoke alarms cut the mustard in rented property?

The LACORS fire safety guide prescribes the appropriate levels of fire protection for private rented property, and should be the first port of call for any landlord or agent unsure of what fire precautions they need to install. Beyond that, DASH is happy to advise on such matters, and any advice given is free and impartial. You will note from a brief review of the LACORS guide, that battery operated smoke alarms are not recommended for rented properties. This is for the simple reason of 'reliability' or in point of fact, the lack of it!

No one would argue that the presence of some battery operated smoke alarms in a property is better than nothing, and indeed many of us have these in our own private family homes. If well managed, they can provide adequate protection for private homes, and clearly they help save many lives annually.

So why are they so inappropriate for rented accommodation?

The truth is that in an ideal world, battery detectors might be fine in some low risk properties, but as we all know, we live in a world that is far from an ideal. Firstly, the 'technical' failure rate amongst cheap battery detectors is several times higher than mains operated ones. So even a 10 year sealed unit might not reach its sell by date. This is because they are not all manufactured to rigorous standards, as being cheap they tend to contain cheap and unreliable electrical components.

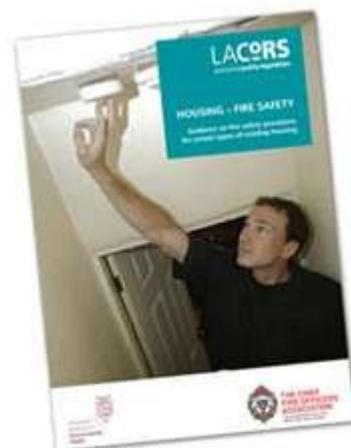
Secondly, the battery itself can fail, be removed by the tenants, or as is most common, the battery can simply run flat, and remain in place between lets. DASH inspectors regularly see smoke alarms with batteries either missing or dead.

Thirdly, battery detectors almost exclusively use 'ionization chamber' technology, rather than more expensive optical scatter components found in some mains units, making them extremely sensitive and often prone to false alarms from cooking vapours. Frequent false alarms of course mean that the alarm itself can be ignored, or worse, attract vandalism of the unit resulting in no detection at all and the cost of replacement to the landlord.

Given that the minimum fire detection requirements under Building Regulations for any new-build private family home now includes the installation of a mains wired interlinked fire alarm with battery backup, is it really such a great leap to retro fit such systems in privately rented accommodation where the fire risks are deemed to be much greater? Typical installation costs for smaller houses are in the region of a few hundred pounds, and usually incorporate no more than three interlinked detectors in the hallways, landing and kitchen.

These costs are of course much higher than for battery detectors, but by staying in compliance with the LACORS Fire Safety Guide, the advantages of installing the correct mains wired fire detection are obvious ...

- Reduces false alarms.
- Reduces vandalism of fire detection fittings.
- Reduces damages – costs – in the event of a fire.
- Peace of mind, having complied with the guidance.
- Reduces chance of litigation/injury claims by tenants.
- Higher quality fittings conforming to prescribed British Standards last longer.
- Interlinked alarms give better noise – siren – coverage.
- Controls for testing, silencing and locating the source of the alarm can be easily incorporated.
- The mains is generally a reliable power source in the UK, and as the detection is usually wired into the mains lighting circuits of a property, any failure/faults with the lighting circuits are usually alerted to the landlord promptly.



Available from:
<http://www.rla.org.uk/docs/LACORSFSguideApril62009.PDF>

