

The Housing and Planning Bill: Mandatory Electrical Safety Checks

The Housing and Planning Bill is an opportunity for government to introduce common sense reforms to protect renters and improve conditions.

Every year, around 350,000 people are injured through contact with electricity and 70 people are killed in the UK. In 2013-14 there were 49 deaths from electrical fires in the home.

Private landlords are not currently required to carry out electrical safety checks on their properties. A simple change to the law would require private landlords to carry out electrical safety checks every 5 years, protecting renters from life threatening electrical hazards in the home. That's why Shelter and British Gas support Electrical Safety First's new clause introducing mandatory five-yearly electrical safety checks.

Conditions in the private rented sector

There are now 11 million private renters in England, and 1 in 4 families in England rely on private renting to provide them with a safe and decent home.

Private renters pay high rents yet they have to endure some of the poorest conditions of any tenure. England's private renters spend 47% of their income on rent, compared to 23% for people with a mortgage and 32% for social renters. Yet, nearly 30% of private rented properties in England would fail the Government's Decent Homes Standard, compared to only 19% of owner-occupied properties and 15% for social renters. Worryingly, 1 in 6 homes have been found to have a serious hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS).

Electrical fires and faults

Too often, poor conditions include electrical faults, which can prove fatal for renters. The private rented sector has the highest percentage of homes judged to have a 'significantly higher than average fire risk' and 11% of tenants have seen electrical faults in their homes. However, there is currently no legal requirement on private landlords to carry out electrical safety checks, except for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs).

Electricity causes more than 20,000 house fires a year and, sadly, in 2013-14 electrical fires in the home caused 49 deaths - an increase on the previous year's figures. The elderly are particularly at risk of death with people over 80 making up nearly 40% of fatalities from portable heater fires.

Many responsible landlords are trying to address this problem, in fact 45% of landlords we surveyed are already carrying out safety checks on their properties, with a further 6% saying they were being carried out on some. Introducing this law will require those who do not currently carry out any checks to do so, and have minimal costs for landlords already carrying out checks.

Support for mandatory electrical safety checks

There is widespread support for the introduction of mandatory electrical safety checks. In a survey conducted by Shelter, the majority of landlords support this legislation; 51% were in favour and 23% were against. Support amongst those landlords who are already carrying out these checks is even stronger, at 71%.

In a recent survey of Parliamentarians, the vast majority of MPs from across all parties agreed that mandatory 5 yearly electrical safety checks are necessary in the private rented sector.

British Gas, Electrical Safety First, the Local Government Association, London Fire Brigade, Savills, Young London and the Association of Residential Letting Agents also support the introduction of mandatory electrical safety checks.

What would the new clause do?

Shelter and British Gas support Electrical Safety First's new clause to introduce mandatory five-yearly safety checks, by a competent person, of the electrical installation and any electrical appliances supplied with private rented sector properties, along with requirements for the provision of relevant safety certificates to tenants.

This would mean that more landlords carried out safety checks, helping to prevent people from being injured or dying because of undetected electrical safety hazards.

Case study, Jane Andain

"Six years ago my daughter Thirza moved to Cornwall with her husband Fred and their two young children. They were excited to be starting a new life in a part of the world they had always loved. A few months later, Thirza was found dead in the bath by her five year old daughter.

Thirza and Fred had moved in to a privately rented cottage while they were looking for somewhere more permanent. From the outside the cottage looked perfect. It had been rented out for years as a holiday let and there were no known problems.

Thirza's post-mortem showed that she had been electrocuted. A further investigation showed that the wiring of the whole house was a complete mess and that she had died after an electric current made its way through the bath taps and into the water. Thirza and her family had noticed that the taps seemed 'tingly' but no one ever thought that this could happen.

My daughter died because she was allowed to move into a house where the electrics and wiring had not been checked in years as her landlord was under no legal obligation to do so. If the electrics had been checked then they would have immediately been found to be unsafe. And Thirza would still be with us today.

Later, I was horrified to learn that while landlords have to provide an annual gas safety certificate for properties that they rent out, there is no such law for electricity in private rented properties. Electricity kills, it's as simple as that. And yet there is no law in place to protect tenants like my daughter.

For this reason I'm supporting Shelter and Electrical Safety First's call for a change in legislation and for the introduction of mandatory five yearly checks of electrical installations in private rented properties. It seems like such a simple ask and so I can't understand why, six years on from Thirza's death, there is still no requirement for landlords to ensure the property they are renting out is in a safe condition. I hope that [...] something, finally, will be done to stop the same thing from happening to other families."

Sources:

English Housing Survey, DCLG, 2013/14

YouGov Survey of 1071 UK Private Landlords, Online, July 2015.

YouGov survey of 3792 private tenants, England, weighted, online, July 2015.

Fire statistics Great Britain: 2013 to 2014, DCLG

Parliamentary Briefing: Housing Bill & the Private Rented Sector: Electrical Safety Checks, ESF, Oct. 2015

For more information, contact Zorana Halpin on [Zorana Halpin@shelter.org.uk](mailto:Zorana_Halpin@shelter.org.uk), 0344 515 2055.