



Action to take in the event of fire: Optivo & Sheffield City Council

Late in 2019 Optivo and Sheffield City Council (SCC) conducted research to gauge residents' likely adherence to stay put advice and to what extent this might be improved by the provision of information in different forms.

Residents were drawn from a cross-section of affordable housing tenures comprising general needs, sheltered and student accommodation.

The two forms of advice under test were a written guide and pair of animated videos containing near identical advice. Both were produced by the London Fire Brigade.

Our headline findings were as follows:

- a) More residents would follow the London Fire Brigade's advice having had access to its written guide or videos. In some scenarios 25% more residents would follow the Brigade's recommended course of action having viewed its advice
- b) However, a considerable proportion of residents would still choose not to comply with the Brigade's advice despite having recently viewed the materials under test. In some cases roughly four in ten would still attempt to evacuate in the event of a fire elsewhere in their building while they were in their flat (contradicting advice to stay put)
- c) Looking across a number of measures, the written guide may be marginally more effective than the videos for conveying advice. Both media led to statistically significant improvements in residents' knowledge across three of the four scenarios under test. But the advice in the written guide is more trusted than that in the videos. Residents are also more likely to view the guide than the videos, in part reflecting lack of internet access/poor digital literacy
- d) Since our results were collected over a relatively short timeframe, no robust conclusions can be made about the influence of medium on residents' ability to commit the advice to long-term memory.

1.0 Introduction

Since the 1960s fire and rescue services have typically advised residents of purpose-built blocks of flats to remain in their flat if it is unaffected by fire or smoke. Recent fires, starting with that at Lakanal House in 2009 and most notably that at Grenfell Tower in 2017, have prompted increased questioning over whether this stay put advice remains universally appropriate. Interest has understandably grown in the public's likely adherence to the advice and what implications that has for future approaches to building safety. But very little evidence exists on the topic. This research sought to plug this gap, while also identifying the most effective method for communicating existing advice.

2.0 Aims

This study had two interrelated aims. These were to determine:

1. to what extent residents of social housing would follow the London Fire Brigade's stay put advice in the event of a fire
2. whether written information or animated videos (containing near identical messaging) are more effective in improving hypothetical adherence to stay put advice.

3.0 Existing secondary evidence

- Various studies (e.g. [Barlow & Wogalter, 1993](#); [Corston & Colman, 1997](#)) have concluded that written information generally results in better recall than that presented in video format, especially where the message being conveyed is reasonably complex
- In September 2018, specialist security and fire industry publishers [IFSEC Global](#) reported that almost three-quarters (72%) of flat tenants would ignore advice to 'stay put' if a fire broke out in their building and their own flat was unaffected by fire or smoke.

4.0 Methods

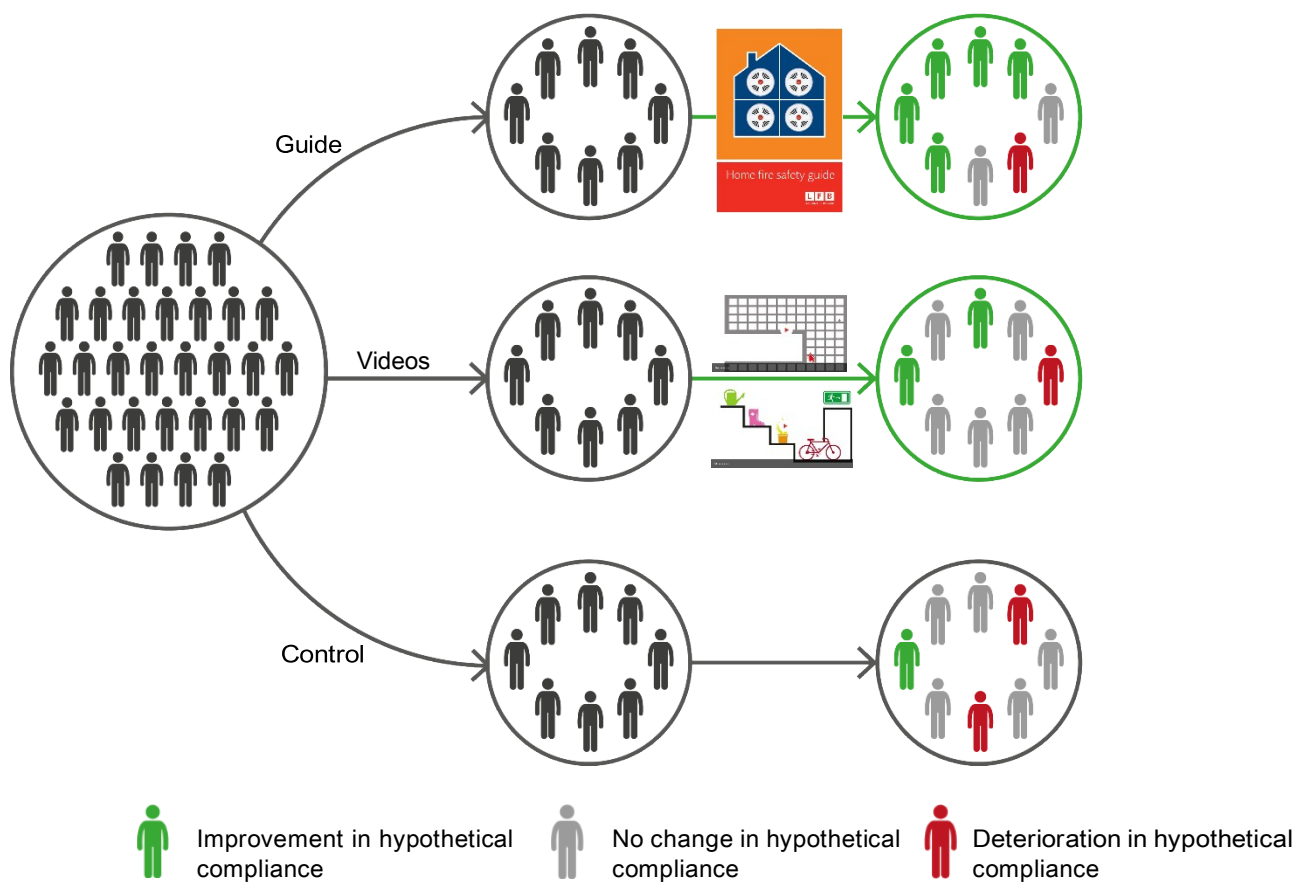
Participants were recruited to the study between October and December 2019 through a combination of door-knocking, phone calls, mail-outs and emails. A 'baseline' survey was conducted at the point of recruitment. Respondents were asked a series of questions to gauge their confidence and knowledge about what to do in the event of a fire across four different scenarios.

Scenario	Description
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You're in your flat• There is a fire or smoke inside your flat• Your escape route is clear
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You're in your flat• There is a fire or smoke inside your flat• Your escape route is NOT clear
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You're in your flat• There is a fire in another part of the building, but not inside your flat
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You're in the common parts of the building (e.g. a stairwell/hallway)• There is a fire in another part of the building

The 340 participants were then randomly assigned to one of three groups as part of a parallel three-arm Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). Such trials are ideal for research such as this because they enable more confident assertions to be made about causality than other research techniques.

One group of residents received a new [written fire safety guide](#) explaining what to do in the event of a fire. A second group was given a hyperlink to a pair of [animated videos](#) on the same topic. And a third – the ‘control’ group – received neither of the materials in an effort to track changes in hypothetical compliance in the absence of an intervention. For the sake of consistency, all materials under test were produced by the London Fire Brigade (LFB). However, we acknowledge the role locally produced and branded advice can have on potential compliance and this might be a topic for future research.

Figure 1: a parallel three-arm randomised controlled trial with illustrative results (graphic adapted from ([Haynes, Service, Goldacre, & Torgerson, 2012](#)))



Follow-up surveys were completed with 187 participants roughly two weeks after they had received the materials under test.

5.0 Main Findings

- More residents would follow the London Fire Brigade’s advice having had access to its written guide or videos. In some scenarios 25% more residents would follow the Brigade’s recommended course of action having viewed its advice
- However, a considerable proportion of residents would still choose not to comply with the Brigade’s advice despite having recently viewed the materials under test. In some cases roughly four in ten would still attempt to evacuate in the event of a fire elsewhere in their building while they were in their flat (contradicting advice to stay put)

- c) Looking across a number of measures, the written guide may be marginally more effective than the videos for conveying advice. Both media led to statistically significant improvements in residents' knowledge across three of the four scenarios under test. But the advice in the written guide is more trusted than that in the videos. Residents are also more likely to view the guide than the videos, in part reflecting lack of internet access/poor digital literacy
- d) Since our results were collected over a relatively short timeframe, no robust conclusions can be made about the influence of medium on residents' ability to commit the advice to long-term memory

6.0 Implications for policy-making

1. It is not sufficient to inform residents of fire safety policies at the point of sign-up. Social landlords should regularly remind residents of the recommended course of action in the event of a fire in order to familiarise them with the advice. This could be through annual visits, newsletters, briefings at resident meetings, video messages and notice boards in blocks
2. Any fire safety strategy needs to take differences in learning styles and preferences into account. Lack of internet access and poor digital literacy are also barriers that need to be considered when assessing the likely impact of any video campaign, especially in the context of social housing
3. No fire brigade should expect 100% compliance with stay put advice even following a high-profile information campaign
4. Where possible, information should be bespoke to individual buildings so that it is as practical as possible to residents
5. Three potential avenues for further research stand out to investigate:
 - a. whether continued non-compliance is a reflection of misunderstanding or distrust of the Brigade's advice and what, if anything, can be done to change opinions. Anecdotal evidence collected through interviews suggests the Grenfell fire and subsequent Inquiry will continue to heavily influence opinions and likely courses of action over the coming years
 - b. how longer-term recall is influenced by medium
 - c. reflecting the results of previous research (e.g. [DCLG, 2008](#)), whether there are any benefits to be gained by tailoring messaging to different demographic groups.

7.0 Next steps

Optivo will continue to signpost the Brigade's advice via a variety of channels and recommends other social landlords do the same if they are not doing so already. SCC will work with the South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service to investigate what can collectively be done to promote locally devised and branded advice to its residents.

Both organisations will continue to engage with residents on fire safety and are already developing bespoke advice for higher-risk buildings. Both will continue to work with the Department to disseminate the findings from this project including through the national Research Users in Social Housing Group and Sheffield Landlords Group.