



Help! I need a Voice Alarm System!

Never fear, the ISCE is here to help you understand what this is and how it relates to your role.

- Are you involved in the development of a new building project or the upgrade of an existing facility, or
- Have you started a new role and inherited this life safety system within your purview?

Whichever of these applies to you, this guide is designed to help navigate your way to having a safe and effective alarm system in complete compliance with the necessary standards.

Don't feel daft for not knowing what voice alarm is. It's a specialist field and there is help available from the ISCE and an entire industry of specialist companies that are dedicated to serve it. The best companies are ISCE Supporting Members or have ISCE professionally graded staff. For more information on the ISCE please go here: www.isce.org.uk

Identifying the need is the first step so that you know what to ask your supply chain for. The second step is to understand your role in this process because you may well be the venue's "Responsible Person" by virtue of an innocuous line item in your job description - but no one is expecting you to actually design, install and maintain a voice alarm system.

So let's go through the steps:

Step 1:

Do you have, or need, a voice alarm system?

A voice alarm system for evacuation of the venue using spoken messages in the event of a fire-related emergency has to meet the requirements of the version of British Standard BS5839-8 that was mandated at the time of its design (standards are periodically reviewed and re-issued to keep them up-to-date).

So if you need a new voice alarm system for fire evacuation, get yourself a copy of the latest version of the standard from BSI (visit <https://shop.bsigroup.com/>)

If you already have a voice alarm system, find out when it was installed to identify the relevant version of the standard.

Please note that these systems usually have a design life of 10 years and so if you are responsible for one that is circa 2008 or earlier then you probably need a new one! Both the standards and technology have moved on significantly in the past 15 years so it is worthwhile considering capital outlay that will offer a cost benefit through reduced maintenance of defunct equipment, give your venue more space for re-utilisation and, of course, give you a firm compliance footing.

My voice alarm system doesn't need to be, or isn't, attached to the fire alarm system!

Then you need to find out if it's used in any other emergency scenario to instruct or evacuate the occupants of your building. Other emergencies could include; security, terrorist threat, bomb alert, chemical leak, earthquake, etc. If you answer "yes" to any of these then you need or already have a "Sound system for Emergency Purposes". This type of voice system is governed currently by BSEN 50849.

So if you need a new voice alarm system of this type, get yourself a copy of the latest version of the standard from the BSI.

If you already have a voice alarm, find out when it was installed to identify the relevant standard (which will be under the previous standard number of BSEN 60849). Please note that these systems also usually have a design life of 10 years and so if you are responsible for one that is circa 2008 or earlier then you probably need a new one for the reasons given earlier.

Step 2:

Are you the “Responsible Person”?

It is really important that you find out if you are because this is not a role to be lost in a job description.

It is in your *personal* interest, not only professional, to appreciate the gravity of this title. At the risk of being dramatic, should there ever be an evacuation that is deemed to fail due to any perceived shortcoming in the “Voice Alarm” system or “The Sound System for Emergency Purposes” you would certainly be held responsible as the Landlords or Owners delegate. The worst case full effect of the law would be manslaughter charges due to negligence. This is because within your role, you are deemed to be the buildings expert responsible for effective evacuation.

It doesn't have to be that scary because your responsibilities are given in the standards and you are allowed to delegate responsibilities by employing experts to assist you.

As the responsible person you will need to ensure that:

1. The system is fit for purpose
2. The system is routinely tested and maintained in accordance with the guidance in the relevant standards
3. Appropriate records are kept and are available to all interested parties
4. All relevant occupants are aware of their responsibilities in connection with the voice alarm or sound system for emergency purposes.

So, for a new system you will be actively involved in the design and installation process by identifying the type of system needed, liaising with licensing authorities, appointing the specialists and/or suppliers and ensuring that the system is certified at every step as required by the standards.

One of the most effective ways to realise this with confidence is to appoint a third party electro-acoustic consultant who will undertake this on your behalf by working with the suppliers. However, if you feel confident, you could do this yourself.

For a newly commissioned and existing system you are responsible for all of the above steps. Let's consider for a moment that you have inherited a system. You should undertake a thorough review of all documentation from installation onwards and quiz the incumbent maintainer to your satisfaction. A great question to ask a maintainer is "Are you prepared to take responsibility for this system?"

But what happens if there is little or no information on the system? Well, if you cannot, hand on heart, fulfil your role you should consider undertaking a dilapidations/benchmark testing of the system to find out how compliant your system is. This will involve appointing specialist electro-acoustic system experts to undertake this technical survey for you. They will assist you in identifying what survey you require and work with you to determine how far-reaching the effort should be while being guided by your immediate budget and stomach for risk. A good question to ask your specialist is "Will you sign this system off as fit for purpose?".

The Key

The intention of the relevant standards is to ensure that speech systems can reliably and accurately inform, direct and evacuate people in the event of an emergency. This is a life safety system. The key is to ensure that your system is intelligible enough to be understood and can still be used in the event of a major catastrophe such as mains power failure. If it can't do those two things, it's NOT fit for purpose. Further if you do not have evidence that it is fit for purpose, you are open to claims of negligence.

Summary

The intention of this document was to give you an overview of speech sound systems used in an emergency and has covered the two types allowed so that you can now determine what you are responsible for.

Once you have read the appropriate standard you may well find yourself bemused by what you have taken on.

However, the ISCE is here to support you and offers a detailed training course that demystifies the requirements and processes in plain English for non-technical “Responsible Persons”. So why not consider adding this into your CPD for this year and move forward with confidence in your ability and your alarm system, rather than with your fingers crossed.

We look forward to welcoming you to our Institute and are confident that you’ll find us helpful and friendly. We operate a firm “There are no stupid questions” policy.

If you have read this and are breathing a sigh of relief that this is not your role please consider sharing this document with your colleague/employee whose role it is.