



SUFFOLK FIRE AND
RESCUE SERVICE

Thatched Property Safety Guide

ENABLING OUR RURAL COMMUNITIES TO
LEAD SAFE AND HEALTHY LIVES





Introduction

Thatched roofing is enjoying a revival in the UK and is particularly popular in Suffolk, given the county's rural nature.

But thatch fires spread at a fast pace and are very difficult to extinguish, often leading to irreversible property damage.

This guide will help the owners of thatched properties to be fully aware of fire risks in their home to be able to prevent these and reduce the likelihood of an incident.

We will cover the common causes of thatched property fires, but for further advice, please contact our Prevention team on 01473 260588 to arrange your **free** home safety visit. Doing so could save not just your property but your life.

Please share this guide with anyone you know who owns a thatched property. Together we can continue to keep Suffolk safe.



Is your chimney well maintained?

Most thatch fires start from the chimney. There are many ways to make sure your chimney is being well looked after, and ensure it isn't the culprit:

- Get your chimney swept regularly - at least once a year but more if you use your chimney frequently - by a qualified chimney sweep.
- Look out for signs that your chimney is deteriorating, this includes staining of the plasterwork or wallpaper around the chimney breast, black or brown localised deposits on the chimney or roof space and soot on cobwebs in the loft.
- Visit www.suffolk.gov.uk/fire and search 'chimney' for more advice.

Making some structural changes can also lessen the chance of a fire happening to you. We recommend raising the height of your chimney. An increased distance between the top of your chimney and the thatch reduces the chances of any sparks setting the thatch alight.

We also suggest reducing the thickness of your thatch and adding a chimney pot too. Make sure the top of the chimney pot is at least 1.8 metres above the thatch. Remember - extra space is extra safety.

Whilst you're making changes, why not line your chimney too? This will stop any fire gases, sparks, and radiated heat from reaching your thatch.

Before making any structural changes you are advised to consult with a qualified chimney engineer.



Care when using open fires

Only burn well-seasoned wood. This is wood which has been left to dry out for a substantial amount of time, so all the moisture has evaporated.

If the wood is wet, water vapour can mix with other gases and particles, which can create condensation. The condensation then hardens to form tar, which is very flammable, and a chimney fire may start. Chimney fires in thatched properties lead to fires in the thatch, and thatch fires sadly often lead to destruction.

Flues to wood burners must be inspected to ensure that heat cannot pass through to a combustible beam or roof structure.

If your stove is burning too hot, you risk sparks catching and igniting the thatch. Too cold, and you may accidentally coat the chimney in soot and tar, which can also lead to a fire. Use a stove pipe thermometer to keep the temperature in check.

Always keep a fire guard in front of a burning fire to prevent burns. Children should never be left unattended around an open fire or log burner.

Never use petrol or paraffin to light your fire, these accelerants can cause fires to quickly get out of control.

Ensure you always extinguish the fire before going to bed or leaving the house.



Other common causes of thatch fires

Electrical

Don't overload electrical sockets! Chargers should be unplugged as soon as they are finished with and you should also avoid charging items, such as laptops and phones, overnight.

Check for signs of loose wiring and faulty plugs or sockets, such as scorch marks or flickering lights.

Consider having your electrical system checked by a qualified electrician in accordance with the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE) guidance.

Bonfires and fireworks

If you live in a thatched home, you should never have a bonfire or set off fireworks and sky lanterns. These are serious hazards to the thatch, and could easily set it alight.

It's also a good idea to have a friendly chat with your neighbours about this one, as they need to be aware of this danger and how their actions may impact your home, too.

Use of power tools

When having work done on your home, you'll need to set some ground rules and ensure that these are being followed.

For example, you shouldn't allow contractors to use blowtorches or heat guns. This equipment is far too risky to use in and around a thatched property. All it takes is a single spark, or heat being directed in the wrong place. Contractors wouldn't want any harm to come to you, your home or themselves from their own actions, so make sure you let them know about this.



Further thatch fire prevention advice

Smoke alarms

- Fit a smoke alarm on every floor of your home, ideally in the hallway or landing ceilings.
- You should also put a smoke alarm in the loft space and link this to others inside the house.
- Don't install a smoke alarm in the kitchen where it can be set off accidentally.
- Test the batteries once a week. Alarms are available with 10-year batteries.

Kitchen safety

Two thirds of fires in the home start in the kitchen. To prevent these you can:

- Install a fire blanket.
- Keep items that can catch fire easily, such as tea towels and oven gloves, away from cookers and toasters.
- Never fill chip pans more than one-third full of oil.

Make a fire plan

Make sure all your family know what to do in the event of a fire and how to escape safely.

Your fire plan should include:

- Planning your escape routes and keeping exits clear.
- Keeping door and window keys handy.
- Considering how a fire in your house will be detected. Have you got a sufficient amount of smoke alarms and are they in the correct position?

Contact our Prevention team on 01473 260588 for more free help and advice.

Enabling our rural communities to lead safe and healthy lives