# WRITTEN STATEMENT

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# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Electrical Fires in Wales** |
| **DATE** | **17 July 2018** |
| **BY** | **Alun Davies, Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services** |

Fires in Wales are in long-term decline, and are now at an all-time low. Sustaining that trend requires a full understanding of the changing risks of fire, and action by our Fire and Rescue Services to tackle those risks. This is especially important for fires in the home, which account for the great majority of deaths and injuries from fire.

Last year we detected a concerning trend in domestic electrical fires. Unlike other known sources of dwelling fires, these are showing a sustained increase. We therefore committed to undertaking research into this increase, and I am now able to publish the findings of that work. It is available at:-

<https://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/safety/fire/?lang=en>

Although most dwelling fires originate in domestic appliances, they are largely caused by unsafe behaviours such as distraction while cooking or placing objects too close to heat. Only a small and declining minority are caused by unsafe electrical appliances themselves. The Fire and Rescue Services in Wales therefore focus much of their prevention activity on raising awareness of fire risks and changing people’s behaviours. This has contributed significantly to the overall decline in accidental dwelling fires over the last 15 years.

However, fires where the source is identified as “electrical distribution” have shown the opposite trend. This includes fires which originate in the electricity supply in homes: electricity meters, fuse boxes and consumer units, wiring for lights and sockets, and the wiring to appliances. These have been the focus of our research, which has looked in great detail at the nature and possible reasons for the increase we have seen. This has been a painstaking exercise which has involved scrutiny of reports about hundreds of individual fires, as well as data from Wales and elsewhere.

I should stress that this research began before the Grenfell Tower fire and has no connection to it. That tragedy arose because of how quickly the fire spread, not why it started. And while it appears likely that the source of the fire was a domestic appliance, there is nothing at all implicating the electrical installation in the tower.

When this issue was raised in Plenary last year there was speculation that the increase related to the increase in use of mobile devices such as phones, tablets and e-cigarettes. However, the detailed evidence shows that this is not the case. We have also been able to rule out links to other electrical appliances, and there does not appear to be a link between the increase in these fires and the ageing of the population.

Whilst we have been able to rule these factors out, we have not been able to identify a definitive reason why this increase has occurred. The trend mostly relates to fires in the South Wales geographical area and is not consistently replicated elsewhere in the UK, or in the USA or Ireland. Around a third of the electrical distribution fires in South Wales relate to fuse boxes or consumer units, and it is reasonable to assume that the causes of these and other fires in electrical distribution systems might include old, damaged or defective wiring use of inappropriately rated or improvised fuses, and overloading of sockets. There may be links to age of housing, housing tenure and/or deprivation, but it is not possible to verify that using the data which are currently available. This is something that I now expect Fire and Rescue Services to explore.

Whatever the exact causes, electrical distribution fires seem more likely to result from old, defective or badly-maintained installations than from the sorts of behavioural issues on which Fire and Rescue Services have focused their home safety work. So the report also recommends that the Services review these programmes accordingly. Firefighters are not electricians and cannot be expected to repair faults – but they can and should raise awareness, identify obviously old or defective installations, and recommend remedial action.

The increase in electrical distribution fires is significant and sustained, and remains a concern. However the number of these fires remain relatively low, and the evidence does not suggest that there is any greater risk of injury from electrical distribution fires than from any other accidental dwelling fire. Nor are vulnerable groups such as older people at significantly greater risk. This report is important in building understanding of fire risks in the home, but it should not be a cause for alarm. I am confident our Fire and Rescue Services will act on it, and I will ensure my officials monitor their progress.