

## **metroSTOR Webinar Summary and Transcript**

### **E-mobility & Fire Safety: Are We Facing a Growing Risk?**

28.01.25

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## metroSTOR Webinar **Summary**

### **E-mobility & Fire Safety: Are We Facing a Growing Risk?**

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#### **Introduction – Nigel Deacon**

Nigel Deacon opened the webinar by welcoming attendees and introducing the session's focus: the risks associated with e-mobility devices, including e-bikes, e-scooters and mobility scooters. He acknowledged the growing concerns tied to lithium-ion batteries and the need for risk mitigation. The panel featured experts Gemma Darville and Stacey Thwaites (Gentoo Group), Jan Taranczuk (Fire Safety and Housing), and Kabbe Njie (Fire and Life Safety Systems).

#### **Gentoo Group's Experience – Gemma Darville and Stacey Thwaites**

##### **Context and Challenges**

Gemma Darville provided an overview of Gentoo Group's work as a housing provider in Sunderland with 30,000 properties, including 25 high-rise residential buildings. She outlined the risks posed by lithium-ion batteries, citing two recent fires in Gentoo properties caused by e-scooters and e-bikes. One fire in a low-rise flat caused extensive damage, demonstrating the potential severity of these incidents.

Gemma noted her duty as the principal accountable person under the Building Safety Act and also Gentoo's duties as a landlord to assess and control fire risks for Fire Safety legislation. These obligations confirmed that further action was required by Gentoo to ensure safety and compliance.

##### **Pilot Project**

To address these risks, Gentoo launched a pilot project across 10 high-rise buildings in September 2024. The project aimed to identify e-mobility devices, assess their risks, and educate residents on fire safety. Stacey Thwaites explained their methodology, which included:

- Conducting resident surveys with a 70-71% response rate of approx. 800 customers.
- Utilising local knowledge from caretaking teams and annual property inspections.
- Partnering with Mobility Care Solutions for health checks on e-vehicles and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service for holistic fire safety reviews.

The health checks assessed the condition of batteries, wiring and charging practices in residents' homes. Stacey emphasised the importance of performing these checks in flats to identify unsafe storage or charging behaviours, such as using extension cords or blocking escape routes.

##### **Key Findings and Engagement Strategies**

Gemma and Stacey highlighted several key lessons:

1. Resident Engagement: Transparent communication and a non-punitive approach encouraged residents to disclose their e-vehicle usage. Education materials and testimonials were instrumental in building trust.

2. **Challenges with DIY Modifications:** Residents using self-modified or imported e-bikes presented a higher risk. Gentoo emphasised working collaboratively with residents to address these hazards.
3. **Tailored Solutions:** Mobility scooters, often essential for accessibility, required nuanced solutions, such as in-flat storage and charging adjustments. In contrast, e-bikes and e-scooters could benefit from external storage options.

### **Broader Recommendations**

1. **Education and Awareness:** All panellists agreed on the importance of raising awareness about the risks of lithium-ion batteries and providing residents with clear guidance on safe usage and charging.
2. **Policy Clarity:** Having a clear e-vehicle policy was essential for managing expectations and addressing risks proactively. Gentoo shared that their approach prioritised case-by-case assessments over blanket bans.
3. **Future Plans:** Gentoo aims to expand the programme to all high-rise buildings, explore external storage options and continue building strong partnerships with fire safety organisations.

### **Panel Reflections – Jan Taranczuk and Kabbe Njie**

Both Jan and Kabbe commended Gentoo's initiative, describing it as a best-practice model for managing the growing risks of e-mobility devices. They emphasised that housing providers must balance fire safety with residents' rights and accessibility needs, advocating for a proactive, collaborative approach.

### **Key Questions from Attendees**

1. **Liability Concerns:** Gentoo addressed liability by partnering with certified third-party providers for health checks, ensuring residents retained responsibility for their devices while benefiting from expert assessments.
2. **External Storage Solutions:** Gentoo is exploring prefabricated and repurposed garage spaces for e-bike and e-scooter storage, ensuring secure, fire-safe charging stations.
3. **Cost and Resource Management:** While the pilot was resource-intensive, the overall cost per vehicle check was manageable (£60 each). Gentoo highlighted the potential cost-savings compared to fire damage.

### **Conclusion – Nigel Deacon**

Nigel Deacon concluded by thanking the speakers and attendees. He encouraged continued collaboration within the housing and fire safety sectors to tackle the risks posed by e-mobility devices. The next webinar, focusing on legal obligations under the Building Safety Act, was announced for February.

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### **E-mobility & Fire Safety: Are We Facing a Growing Risk?**

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#### **Introduction – Nigel Deacon**

Flats Recycling - why we should close refuse chutes

#### **Nigel Deacon**

Good morning, all. Thank you for joining our webinar on E-mobility: Are we facing a growing risk? I think we all have some idea of the answer to that question, but we'll have an even clearer picture in a few minutes. We've already got 118 attendees, which is fantastic. We really appreciate you giving us your time.

I'm very grateful to have several colleagues with us today:

- Gemma Darville and Stacey Thwaites from Gentoo Group
- Jen Taranczuk from Fire Safety and Housing
- Kabbe Njie from Fire and Life Safety Systems

Together, we'll be unpacking this rather challenging topic. To kick things off, I want to briefly touch on a recent incident where we posed the question: Are devices like this something we should be concerned about? A clear example of high-risk devices is DIY-constructed e-bikes, which are probably among the highest risks we face. Unfortunately, the number of incidents, injuries and fatalities continues to rise.

As a sector, we are quite exposed to these risks but does every device pose the same level of danger? Not necessarily. A properly manufactured and well-maintained product that isn't damaged or misused doesn't carry the same risk. The challenge is knowing which is which.

What we've been discussing a lot lately is the need for a structured approach – a four-point plan:

- 1.** Educate: Raise awareness of the risks.
- 2.** Locate: Identify where potential risks might exist.
- 3.** Investigate: Assess the level of risk, considering the condition of the device and where it's being stored.
- 4.** Mitigate: Implement safe charging practices, designate safe charging spaces, and take other necessary precautions.

On that note, I'll now hand over to Gemma, who will share some of the knowledge and experience they've been developing at Gentoo Group. Thank you, Gemma.

## Gemma Darville

Thanks, Nigel and hello everyone.

To give a bit of background, I'm Gemma Darville and I'm joined by my colleague, Stacey Thwaites. We work within the Health, Safety, Risk and Assurance team at Gentoo Group. We are a social housing provider based in Sunderland, in the North East of England. We manage around 30,000 properties, which are home to approximately 60,000 customers. Of these, 25 are high-rise residential buildings, housing nearly 2,000 customers.

Today, we'll be sharing our approach to reducing the risks associated with e-scooters and e-bikes within our high-rise residential buildings, where we recognised these as a greater risk.

As Nigel mentioned, we're all aware that e-mobility devices like e-scooters, e-bikes and mobility scooters are becoming increasingly popular. Many people rely on them as their primary mode of transport and a lot are used for work or delivery jobs. Most of these devices are powered by lithium-ion batteries.

Alongside the nationwide and regional increase in their use, our local Fire and Rescue service has confirmed the growing risks. Over the past 14 months, we've experienced two fires at Gentoo caused by e-vehicles. We've included a couple of real pictures taken from the fires in the slides. The top image shows significant fire damage from a fire in one of our low-rise blocks of flats. Fortunately, it was contained within the flat but it highlights the level of damage and devastation caused by fires from lithium-ion batteries.

We also had a fire involving an electric scooter in a domestic property and the bottom images show the scooter and the damage it caused within the kitchen of the property. This had a profound impact on the family living there. As Nigel touched on earlier, there are many types of e-vehicles, including e-scooters, e-bikes and mobility scooters. E-bikes are of particular concern, especially where there have been DIY modifications, conversions or aftermarket changes, which increase the risk.

Moving on to the next slide, we've included a video from Sky News, which demonstrates the speed and intensity at which these fires can burn. The video lasts around 40 to 50 seconds but it effectively shows the magnitude of the fire caused by a lithium-ion battery. We felt it was important to include this as it helps provide context for those joining the webinar, allowing them to see just how fast and hot these fires can get.

Regarding our responsibilities at Gentoo, as the landlord, we know we have a duty under fire safety legislation to assess and control fire risks in all our multi-occupied properties with communal areas. We also have a duty as the principal accountable person under the Building Safety Act, particularly in our 25 high-rise residential buildings.

When reviewing our approach, we had to consider how we could identify where e-vehicles are being used, what types of e-vehicles our customers have and how they are using them. It was important that we took a proportionate approach. Simply banning these devices from our properties wasn't the right solution. We recognise that people's lifestyles are changing and many are using e-vehicles more for transport or leisure.

Just telling customers they couldn't have e-vehicles in our buildings wouldn't solve the issue. It might even encourage them to buy them anyway and store them unsafely without informing us. We wanted to work collaboratively with our customers, understand the risks and educate them on safe use and storage.

We decided to take additional steps in our high-rise buildings to reduce these risks further. I'll now hand over to Stacey, our Building Safety Advisor, who focuses on customer engagement. She'll take you through the pilot project we implemented here at Gentoo.

Thanks, Stacey.

### **Stacey Thwaites**

So, the first thing we needed to do when agreeing to launch a pilot project was to identify where the work would take place. We selected ten of our high-rise residential buildings to pilot this project in September 2024. I started by creating demographic profiles for all the residents in those buildings so we could understand their communication preferences. We also needed to know if anyone had mobility needs and generally, how we could best engage with the residents.

What we found was that a one-size-fits-all approach wouldn't work here, which wasn't surprising. It was clear we needed to speak to customers as individuals. We used a hybrid approach, including emails, text messages, phone calls and even door knocking, to ask residents if they had any mobility or evacuation needs within their property. On the right-hand side of the slide, you can see an example of a text message we sent to residents, along with a short survey. It only took them two or three minutes to complete, and we explained that we had a duty to keep them and their neighbours safe from fire risks. We asked whether they had an electric vehicle in their property, including mobility scooters, e-bikes, or e-scooters and if not, whether they were planning to get one in the next 12 months.

This pilot project was valuable for the point in time at which it was conducted. Any new electric vehicles coming into the building would need to be addressed, so we had to plan for when we'd roll this out again.

We were delighted with the response rate, which didn't come without hard work. There were multiple reminders and many customers responded after a combination of text messages and door knocking, or text messages followed by phone calls. In Phase 1 of the pilot in September, we had a 70% return rate and in Phase 2, which ran in December, we had a 71% return rate. To put that into context, we were reaching out to 800 properties across these ten buildings.

We also made use of local knowledge and as a top tip, don't discount the knowledge of your teams on the ground. Our housing teams and caretaking teams know the customers and can often identify who may have electric vehicles, especially if there are conversions or imported vehicles that may not be declared. We also contacted residents who we believed may have mobility scooters or e-vehicles in their flats to confirm this.

We aligned this initiative with our annual property inspections. These inspections are done by the local housing teams and focus on tenancy management, but we also asked them to look for any e-vehicles. This gave us the opportunity to confirm whether residents had the vehicles they had declared or whether there were any unreported vehicles.

For the checks, we worked with Mobility Care Solutions, a company based in Sunderland that specialises in the maintenance, buying and selling of e-vehicles and mobility scooters. We also partnered with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, the local fire service for these buildings, who conducted safe and well visits to look at the property and any fire safety risks, including those related to e-vehicles.

Once we identified customers who confirmed they had an e-vehicle, we offered them an appointment, which took 30 to 40 minutes, to have the vehicle checked. Gentoo paid for these checks and we provided the customers with service certificates confirming the check had been completed. During the inspection, everything was looked at – from the upholstery, which doesn't raise fire safety concerns, to the casters, the frame, the battery, motor and charging facilities. The wiring, plug and the charging environment were also assessed. A test run was carried out to ensure the vehicle was starting up correctly. At the end of the process, both the customer and Gentoo received a copy of the service certificate.

The checks were done in the customer's property, rather than bringing the vehicles into a communal area or to Mobility Care Solutions' warehouse. We felt this was essential because we needed to see where and how the vehicles were being charged. It was important to ensure they were in a clear space and not blocking any means of escape. We also checked for issues like daisy-chaining extension cords or overloaded sockets. We found that doing the checks in the customer's property gave us the most accurate understanding of their charging and storage conditions.

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service played an invaluable role in this process. I've found that when a fire service representative is present, customers tend to listen more attentively. The combination of an industry expert in e-vehicles, the fire service and a Gentoo representative all telling the same message really had the desired impact. It made the customers feel safer and more willing to work with us.

Mobility Care Solutions also offered customers an additional service, at their own expense, to return in 12 months to recheck the vehicle. This provided further reassurance for both the customer and Gentoo that the vehicle was well maintained and safe to remain in the property for at least 24 months.

We also provided customers with a guidance leaflet, which I'll share after the session. This leaflet included important information on the safe use, storage, and charging of e-vehicles, as well as how to dispose of damaged batteries, how to spot signs of damage, and what to do if they notice any issues. We encouraged them to avoid charging their vehicles when wet, not to leave them charging overnight and to ensure they were charging in a safe, clear space. We also advised against storing e-vehicles in communal areas or escape routes.

It was important for us to explain our reasoning to customers and many of them appreciated having this information. Some customers wanted to stay and watch Mobility Care Solutions service their vehicle, especially as some of these vehicles are quite expensive and they wanted to make sure they were handled properly. For others who didn't want to observe the inspection, we went through the leaflet with them, which sparked a discussion on why we were doing this and what they should look out for.

So far, we've carried out 19 checks on e-vehicles as part of this pilot project. We have been able to provide reassurance and put customers in touch with a company where they could arrange regular servicing.

This initiative also had a positive impact on other residents in the building. A top tip from me is to close the loop – it's not just about doing the health checks and ensuring the vehicles are safe, but also about informing the entire building that these checks have taken place. This reassures other residents, even if they don't have e-vehicles, that we're managing fire safety concerns throughout the building.

Looking ahead, we plan to roll this out to all our high-rise buildings. We have an additional 15 high-rise buildings that need to be considered for the next steps. This pilot has been successful and we are also exploring external storage options for e-vehicles, specifically e-bikes and e-scooters.

Now, I'll hand over to Gemma to discuss our findings. Thank you.

### **Gemma Darville**

Thank you, Stacey. That was a great summary of our approach and I can see there are lots of questions coming in the chat as well, which we can try to address with Nigel's support after this. But just to cover our learnings from the project, Stacey touched on the importance of engaging with customers, not just those who own the EVs, but everyone in the building. We really want to foster that 'neighbour's keeper' approach, where residents look out for each other. We want everyone to feel reassured that we are taking fire safety very seriously in the building.

Getting the engagement right from the outset was crucial. When we first conducted the survey to identify who had an e-bike or e-scooter, we didn't want customers to feel targeted. We didn't want anyone to hide their vehicles, especially if they had made DIY conversions, out of fear that we might ask them to get rid of them. We worked hard to send out proactive messaging, reassuring everyone that our goal was simply to ensure the safety of the building. People are increasingly aware of the risks associated with lithium batteries, especially with the media coverage of related fires, so we used this knowledge to emphasise that we were all in this together. We encouraged customers to be open and honest with us, reassuring them that we wanted to work collaboratively to make sure the building was safe.

As Stacey mentioned, we are looking into external storage options to further reduce the risks. However, this was something we could implement relatively quickly and at low cost, allowing us to assess the current risk in the building while we explore longer-term storage solutions. When consulting with customers, we found that there was a real difference in the use of mobility scooters versus e-scooters and e-bikes. Mobility scooter users, when asked whether they'd consider external storage, were generally hesitant. Many of them rely on their scooters to access the lift and their flat, so they prefer to store them in their own flats. This distinction is important as we consider future solutions.

Another key learning was the importance of having an up-to-date EV policy in place. As we raised awareness about the risks, customers began asking what our stance was on e-vehicles. What is allowed? What isn't? It's essential to have a clear policy in place before launching a project like this, so customers know exactly what's acceptable and what's not, particularly in terms of safety concerns. We also made sure to clarify the procedure for dealing with e-vehicles that failed the health check or had significant safety concerns. This was an issue we debated extensively at Gentoo – how would we address this? Would we insist that a vehicle be removed? After careful consideration, we decided to take a case-by-case approach. Each customer's needs are different. Some might choose to remove their vehicles voluntarily if they're deemed unsafe, which is fantastic. For others, particularly those who rely on mobility scooters and cannot afford repairs, we are prepared to provide support, possibly through our tenancy sustainment funds.

Mobility Care Solutions were invaluable in this process. In one instance, a vehicle failed the health check, but Mobility Care Solutions arranged for it to be transported back to their facility for repairs, much to the customer's satisfaction. They also offer a follow-up service in 12 months, which gives both the customers and us reassurance that the vehicles are being properly maintained.



It's important to highlight that, although the project has been incredibly successful, I wouldn't underestimate the time it takes to engage with customers and ensure they feel comfortable. Some might initially think that if they report an e-bike or e-scooter, we might ask them to remove it. But our approach was clear: we wanted to work with them to ensure that the vehicles were safe and we funded the checks to provide this reassurance. Our aim was to reduce risk in the short term while we looked for longer-term solutions.

Given the success of the pilot, we plan to roll this out across all our other high-rise buildings and to continue this on a cyclical basis. That's all from us. Thank you.

### **Nigel Deacon**

Thank you, Gemma. Thank you, Stacey. That was a very thorough and insightful presentation. I had a couple of questions, but you've actually answered them all. There are a lot of really good questions in the chat, which we'll pull up in a moment.

Jan, do you want to go first?

### **Jan Taranczuk**

Hi, yes. Looking at the range of questions and the time we have, I'll keep this brief. The important thing here is that Gentoo have taken the initiative. There are lots of questions about what to do if people don't respond and I'm sure Gentoo can address that accordingly. But the key point is that landlords need to be proactive and this approach by Gentoo is a great example. I'm sure there are others on the call who have been doing similar things – it'd be great if they could share their experiences too. We know of some good work happening in Poplar, and with other councils. The purpose of this session is to share best practices with the goal of reducing deaths. At the beginning of the session, I shared links to four coroner's reports on fire-related deaths, where coroners have expressed concerns. I'm happy to discuss that further if needed, but for now, it's important to focus on answering the questions people are raising.

### **Nigel Deacon**

Excellent, thank you.

Kabbe, do you want to share some observations?

### **Kabbe Njie**

Thank you, Nigel. Full disclosure, this is the second or third time I've seen this presentation now and I must admit I feel a bit redundant, as much of what I would have said has already been covered.

As a strategy and approach, this is probably one of the best I've encountered. Of course, there are other ways to address this problem, but this is very comprehensive. As Gemma and Stacey have pointed out, this approach is something that can be iterated over time – it doesn't have to be perfect from day one and that's a reasonable expectation. Gemma, Stacey and the team deserve congratulations because this effort addresses a significant gap in leadership, structure and guidance. For a long time, managing these types of risks has lacked sufficient direction, but now, with this initiative, we're finally seeing a step forward in managing fire safety in buildings.

It's important not to forget that the measures we're implementing today are relatively new, even eight years after Grenfell. It's up to us, in our respective industries, to define what 'good' looks like, what best practice means when it comes to managing known risks.

Again, Gemma and Stacey, this is an excellent start. It provides a brilliant foundation that can only improve over time if needed. As for the 'what if' questions, we can address those after the fact because this is a well-structured, reasonable approach that is fit for purpose. The primary goal here is to improve safety in these buildings, many of which may have imperfections, but all of which now face new types of fire risks. The work you've done, Gemma and Stacey, is invaluable and I'm proud to speak about it whenever I can. So thank you.

**Nigel Deacon**

Thanks, Kabbe. I completely agree, it's a great example.

Looking at some of the questions and comments, one of the things that Neil Tomlin raised – and I'm sure many people can relate to – is what about those who don't engage? You touched on it earlier, Gemma. Is there anything else you can share on that? Do you think the overall awareness among residents will make a significant difference?

**Gemma Darville**

Yes, I think so. I think it also depends on how you communicate the message. If someone absolutely doesn't want to tell you because they think there's an issue with their own device, that's a different story. They might be concerned about having something unsafe but not wanting to declare it. However, this isn't just us in the fire and building safety team – it's a collective approach across all of our teams. We work closely with our housing colleagues who know our customers well. We have what we call neighbourhood coordinators, or sometimes housing managers, who work specifically with our high-rise buildings. They get to know our customers and understand who has what, allowing us to build relationships and educate them about safety, bringing them on the journey with us.

There will always be challenges, of course, but we also work with our property colleagues, particularly our trade colleagues who carry out repairs and maintenance. They have a "something not quite right" button on their handheld devices. If they spot something that seems unsafe – for example, lots of extension leads or anything that doesn't look quite right – they can flag it with this button. The information is sent to a central inbox and then passed to the relevant department, so we can follow up on it.

**Nigel Deacon**

That's really helpful.

**Gemma Darville**

It's definitely a work in progress. If people don't want to engage, it's about continuously reinforcing the safety messages. We're planning to share testimonials from customers about how they feel safer as a result. We're also looking at launching an ongoing newsletter for these buildings to keep pushing out those safety messages and encourage people to reach out for support.

**Nigel Deacon**

That's great, thank you. There's an interesting question here about the budget provision for this project. Is there anything you'd be willing to share about that? Perhaps ways in which you offset the costs?

**Gemma Darville**

When we first came up with the idea, we had already budgeted for it within our plan. It was something we

felt could be done fairly inexpensively. The cost came to about £60 per service for each individual e-bike or e-scooter. In the grand scheme, it wasn't too expensive but it was quite resource-heavy. Engaging with customers, getting their feedback from the service and coordinating appointments between the Fire and Rescue service, the mobility provider and the customer was time-consuming.

We already had a budget allocated for customer engagement in our high-rise buildings, so we were able to use that provision. In the end, the costs weren't as high as we originally expected. And if you consider the cost of a fire, it would likely offset itself quite quickly.

### **Nigel Deacon**

Absolutely.

### **Gemma Darville**

We haven't had any comments from the regulator yet. This is the first time we've really shared our approach on a wider scale, but we haven't received any feedback from them. We've submitted safety cases for five of our high-rise residential buildings as part of the Building Assessment Certificate application and we've had some requests for further information. We've included our approach as one of the key controls for managing this significant risk, but no feedback from them yet.

If we do receive any feedback, Nigel, we'll be happy to share it.

### **Kabbe Njie**

Let's make sure we ask for feedback from those who have taken the time to attend today. I'm confident that, based on what I've seen and what's been achieved, the feedback will be overwhelmingly positive. I can't think of anything that doesn't show the action you've taken is reasonable, proportionate, and a best endeavours approach. That's how we must operate. Even in circumstances where engaging with people is challenging, or when there's resistance, we now have a process in place to follow up. We are doing everything reasonably practicable to identify risks and people who may be at increased risk from these new hazards. And if we're unable to engage for any reason, at least we can demonstrate, if challenged, that we've made every effort. This is in line with the new social contract, where we're compelled to do these things and to evidence them. I think this is a fantastic example of an approach that works.

### **Jan Taranczuk**

Nigel, can I just quickly add something before the ladies get back to answering some of those important questions? Let's address the Building Safety Regulator (BSR) point straight away. The BSR has made it very clear that they don't offer opinions on anything. They only ask questions and expect us to come up with the answers. So, they won't express an opinion either way. Regarding the question in the chat about building assessment certificates, no one has received their building assessment certificate yet. It's worth noting that while people have been sending their submissions since 1st April, we are now 10 months into the first year of the 12,500 properties that are supposed to have certificates, and nobody has received one yet. So, let's put the BSR point to bed for now and get back to addressing some of the important questions in the chat.

### **Nigel Deacon**

Yes, thank you again, I appreciate that. Some people have raised concerns about individuals being resistant to making alternative arrangements for external storage and charging, as they may find it inconvenient or worry about security. I think you've addressed this pretty well already, Gemma and Stacey, but is there anything else you'd like to add around those discussions you've had with users?

### **Stacey Thwaites**

I think, just to pick up on what Gemma said earlier, it's important to distinguish between need and want. You'll have mobility scooter users who absolutely need their vehicles, and that's where you'll find reasonable resistance. They need access to their property. For the 'want', you can overcome this to some extent. If you have a very clear policy in place and secure storage that they're comfortable using, I think you can make progress.

With the right engagement, I'm confident there's a way to address those 'wants' and come to a suitable arrangement. But the 'need' is where you need to carefully consider whether it will be appropriate. It all comes back to understanding your buildings, the residents in them, and having a demographic profile behind it. We must ensure that any solution is suitable for the people in that building. We're not trying to shoehorn something into a building that isn't going to work. It's essential to take a resident-first approach.

### **Nigel Deacon**

That's very clear and well put. Thank you.

Next, a good question regarding PEEPs, or the Person Centred Fire Risk Assessment (PCFRA). Was this something you carried out at the same time as part of this process?

### **Stacey Thwaites**

Yes, so with the appointments, there was always a representative from Gentoo who went out and attended the appointment. That would either be myself, a colleague from the fire safety team, or one of our building surveyors. Those of us who are capable of carrying out PCFRAs may have started the process with the customer while conducting the survey.

However, not everyone needed one. A person-centred fire risk assessment focuses on their ability to evacuate the building. For example, someone may have a mobility scooter but live on the first or second floor. If they don't have the mobility to evacuate safely without the scooter, that's when the need for a PCFRA arises. So, we didn't give a PCFRA to every customer with a mobility scooter. It's about looking at the individual and their needs, and what support they might need to evacuate the building in an emergency.

### **Gemma Darville**

I think you've covered that well. We've discussed it a fair bit since and we've been doing person-centred fire risk assessments since 2019, not just for high-rise buildings or those with simultaneous evacuation strategies, but for any customer at greater risk from fire who lives in a multi-occupied property, this includes low-rise buildings, high-rise buildings, and sheltered accommodation. Currently, we've carried out around 350 PCFRAs across the group.

These assessments look at factors beyond mobility scooters. We also consider people who may be hard of hearing and could benefit from vibrating pillows or strobe lights, as well as unsafe smoking behaviours, hoarding, and other unsafe fire behaviours. We aim to support these customers, potentially through referrals to partner agencies or by offering good advice and support. We work closely with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service on this, especially with their Safe and Well referrals.

As Stacey said earlier, sometimes partnering with the Fire and Rescue Service has a greater impact. People seem to listen more when they see us working together. We do a lot of partnership work with the Fire and Rescue Service whenever we can.

**Nigel Deacon**

That's really helpful, thank you. What recommendations do you make for people, particularly when the device remains in the flat? What sort of simple guidance did you provide around safe charging practices?

**Stacey Thwaites**

Yes, absolutely. I touched on this earlier, but the reason for doing the assessment in the flat was so we could see their charging practices as they were. We were very cautious in that we told them we were coming to service the device, but we didn't give them much more detail before the appointment. I wanted to get an authentic view of how they were living in their property. This is why the Fire Service was able to identify any other fire safety risks. I'll share a copy of the leaflet with you, as it was included in the guidance.

A lot of it focused on ensuring customers were awake, alert, and in the same room while charging their devices, ensuring the charger was plugged directly into the socket, and that the charger was authentic and compatible with the device. It was also about not charging when the device was wet and not attempting to modify or convert the vehicle.

We advised charging in a clear, well-ventilated area, away from heat sources like radiators, to prevent overheating. We kept the guidance simple, with plain English and an invitation for customers to contact us if they had any questions or wanted us to check something.

There were a couple of examples where, with permission, we made adjustments. For instance, we came across a customer who didn't have hoarding tendencies, but their one-bedroom flat was very cluttered. While we were there, we were able to remove an extension cord they had been using to charge their mobility scooter and we made sure it was plugged directly into the socket.

Another example involved a customer with a very large mobility scooter, one of those that looks almost like a motorbike. It was stored in the hallway, which was their single point of escape from the flat. There was no way to squeeze around it. They said they simply sat on it and drove out, but I explained that in a fire, that logic wouldn't work. We moved furniture in their bedroom to find space to store the scooter, ensuring the escape route remained clear. It was really important that we did this in the flat.

**Nigel Deacon**

That's really helpful, Stacey, thank you for that. There are quite a few comments about people charging their devices in communal areas. I think we all agree that this is not what we're talking about here. We're focused on ensuring a safe charging space within the flat and I think we all agree that charging in communal areas is not acceptable.

**Kabbe Njie**

Can I offer an opinion on this, Nigel?

**Nigel Deacon**

Please, do.

**Kabbe Njie**

I think, as responsible individuals, we have a moral obligation to ensure we're not negatively impacting others through our decision-making or tolerance of risk. We must distinguish between leisure or commercial vehicles, like e-bikes, and mobility scooters, which are essential for some people to live a relatively fulfilled life.

For example, imagine a block of flats with six dwellings and one person whose only means of transport is their scooter. Is it reasonable to say they absolutely cannot have access to it? We must consider the negative impact on that person. We might be able to manage this situation by putting controls in place, but with six scooters on the same floor, that becomes more difficult to manage.

Zero tolerance works in some cases, but not all. Sometimes a managed approach is more appropriate. In some instances, it's not feasible to say no to scooters and we have to consider what other measures we can put in place to mitigate risk. It's not ideal to have battery-powered vehicles charging in communal spaces, but in some cases, there may be no alternative. If the only available space is a communal area, can we implement additional controls, such as suppression systems, smoke ventilation, or enhanced detection to mitigate the risks?

Zero tolerance is easier, but it's not always reasonable. We need to make responsible decisions and accept that some conditions may not be perfect. If that's the case, what measures can we put in place to reduce the risk? We can't always eliminate risk entirely, but we can manage it.

### **Jan Taranczuk**

Nigel, may I quickly jump in? I can see the chat has gone mad! But just to come back to our Gentoo colleagues, did you receive any legal advice from your team regarding what actions you should take if you come across something you're not happy with? And secondly, do you believe you have the legal right to remove something from a communal area?

### **Gemma Darville**

We work with our housing colleagues on this, particularly with regard to what their tenancy agreement specifies. We'd look at it carefully, but the last resort would always be to enforce from a tenancy management perspective. We really focus on working with our housing colleagues to address the specific risks. If it becomes such a significant risk that we have no other option, we may need to pursue legal proceedings, such as issuing a notice of seeking possession. However, we would absolutely involve our legal team in that process.

What we really need to establish is that because some tenancy agreements were written before e-scooters and e-bikes became common, a lot of people signed these agreements when they weren't even a consideration. As such, we're in a position where there's nothing explicit written in those agreements regarding them. We can now look at addressing that through education and working closely with our customers. If we identify a serious risk and can't get the customer to engage with us, then we might need to pursue the housing route. But it's a tricky situation because, you know, these are electrical appliances within someone's own home. We don't have control over people's other electrical appliances, like their white goods, and nor should we, except where it relates to things we're responsible for, like fixed wiring.

So, what we're trying to do here is understand what reasonable steps we can take for an identified risk and what approach is proportionate. As Stacey mentioned earlier, it's about a customer-led approach, understanding their challenges and engaging with them. I don't believe for a second that any of our customers want a known safety risk or fire hazard in their flat. It's about how we identify that and how we engage with customers to mitigate it.

**Jan Taranczuk**

I think that's a fair point. I also want to remind colleagues that, with only 10 minutes left in today's session, there will be an email coming out from Nigel in the next few days regarding another webinar at the end of February on the legal implications of fire safety in tower blocks. The Building Safety Act places a legal obligation on residents not to do anything that compromises fire safety within the block. However, no one has yet implemented or used this particular piece of legislation, so it's something we may need to consider if someone isn't complying. I think that response was really helpful, thank you.

**Stacey Thwaites**

I think, Jan, there's also a place for reasonable adjustments. We're expecting tenants to comply with our policies on storage in communal areas, which are, as you mentioned, sterile. But bringing the customer-centric view back into this: is it because there's a lip on their door [that their vehicle doesn't fit safely]? Can we provide ramps or tapered ramps to allow customers to bring their vehicles into their properties? Or is it that there isn't a socket where they need it to charge? Can we install a socket in their property? It's about making reasonable adjustments to ensure it's as accessible as possible for residents to follow our policy.

**Jan Taranczuk**

I agree entirely. And as with all things related to fire safety, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. It's about what seems right at the time. Conversations like this are incredibly helpful.

**Nigel Deacon**

Just asking, would you be happy to share your policy? Gemma, Stacey, I know you mentioned the leaflet and inspection form, etc., but if you're happy to share those as well, that would be hugely appreciated. It's something we get asked about often—what are others doing and how are they approaching this? If in the spirit of mutual benefit, if you're able to share, I'm sure everyone would greatly appreciate it.

**Gemma Darville**

Absolutely. We're finalising everything at the moment, but we'll share all of our documents, Nigel. If anyone has anything else, I know there's some guidance being shared in the chat too. If anyone else has resources or information they'd like to share, it would be really helpful. We're all facing the same challenges and trying to come up with solutions, so any shared experiences would benefit everyone.

**Nigel Deacon**

Yes, completely agree. Another question that has come up, which is quite interesting, is about charging users for external storage. This could apply to any provision you might make—whether for external storage or elsewhere. Is anyone charging users for that, perhaps in the form of a rental?

**Gemma Darville**

At the moment, we're exploring all options for external storage and that's something we'll consider. However, we also want to make sure it's accessible to customers and that they'll actually use it. Absorbing the cost could help encourage usage. We do have an extra care scheme with an internal, purpose-built scooter store and we don't charge for the charging there. But it's about finding the right balance, isn't it? Between the costs to landlords, housing associations and councils versus encouraging customers to use it. Building external storage is quite an investment, so we need to make sure it's secure and that customers are motivated to use it. There's also the question of whether external storage is the right approach, especially for mobility scooters, or if it's better suited to things like e-scooters and e-bikes, which people might store and charge in their flats.

**Nigel Deacon**

Absolutely. I completely agree. A mobility scooter that's been regularly maintained may still have a lead-acid battery, which presents a low risk, whereas something like an e-bike with several lithium-ion batteries in poor condition is a much higher risk.

**Jan Taranczuk**

There was one of the questions about whether you check the passive fire safety in a property when you're looking at a scooter. Presumably, the whole issue about passive fire safety will have been dealt with at some stage by the building safety team. When you've completed a Type 4 FRA, that's part of the assessment for the safety case report anyway.

**Gemma Darville**

No, we don't include checks on passive fire protection as part of this health check. We have our inspection programme, where we look at flats and stores quarterly, and communal doors quarterly within these buildings. We also have our fire risk assessment that is done outside of this process. If there was anything glaring that we noticed during our inspections, we would obviously flag it. But passive fire protection checks are done separately.

We do Type 1 in all of these buildings, and then where we have concerns, we do further investigations as needed. In some buildings, we've had to do a Type 4 because of concerns over compartmentation, and in others, we've conducted additional fire door inspections. However, we haven't taken a blanket approach to Type 4 across all buildings. If we need to investigate further, we would.

**Nigel Deacon**

Yes. Thank-you. Another question?

**Glenn Loftus**

Hello, I'm Glenn Loftus. How have you ensured there's no liability transferred to you when you're looking at this equipment and certifying it as correct?

How have you ensured there's no liability transfer if, say, a few months later one of those units fails?

**Nigel Deacon**

Great question, Glenn.

**Gemma Darville**

We've done that by partnering with Mobility Care Solutions, who are independent from Gentoo Group and offer this service. The contract is between the customer and the Mobility Care Solutions provider. We facilitate the service and pay for it, but they are the ones who hold the full service certificate. Any further work that needs to be done is handled by them. We made sure that the company we partnered with is competent and has the necessary expertise before we appointed them as our partner.

**Glenn Loftus**

OK. Thank you very much.



**Nigel Deacon**

Terms and conditions and insurance and all that sort of thing. Yes, that's really helpful. Any other questions?

**Amy Weavis**

Hi, yes, just a quick question. You mentioned that the servicing company will provide a list of recommendations. If there's things that need to be done following that, do you have something in place to follow that through, or is it down to the customer to carry it out? If issues are identified, how is that process followed through?

**Gemma Darville**

It's down to the customer to take action on any recommendations unless they tell us that it's unsafe and a fire risk at that time. In such cases, we would work with the customer to understand their needs. One of the cases we had, where immediate work was needed, the customer was happy for the mobility company to carry out the repairs and then return it to them. If it's wear and tear or other minor recommendations, that's between the customer and the provider in terms of getting the work done, should they wish to.

**Nigel Deacon**

Thanks, Amy. And thanks, Gemma. Solvita has a questions here.

**Solvita Hadaj**

Yes, hi, I've got two questions. What's your stance on storing these items, bikes, e-bikes and mobility scooters, in a cycle store? We have some cycle stores attached to the block and some not attached to the blocks. What's your stance and what do you recommend for external storage solutions?

**Gemma Darville**

We don't actually have any cycle storage at any of our buildings at Gentoo. I'm not sure about the North East in terms of our cycling facilities, but no, we don't! We are, however, looking at external storage for these items and considering a range of options, such as prefabricated solutions that could be dropped into a car parking area, or converting some garages near several high-rise buildings to increase security and possibly add charging stations. We're in the early stages of looking at all the options and what would work best for each building.

**Solvita Hadaj**

Thank you.

**David Shannon**

Apologies if you've already covered this, but do you or anyone else have a risk assessment template for the storage and charging of e-bike batteries in various scenarios?

**Nigel Deacon**

Great question, David.

**Gemma Darville**

We don't have one, David, but if we move to external storage, we would capture that as part of the fire risk assessment. As it stands, we don't have any such templates. We do conduct individual fire risk assessments for people who have them in their flats, but we don't have a wider-scale template for that.

**Siobhan Rumble**

Yes, we have one. I'm just looking for it now and I'll put it in the chat.

**Nigel Deacon**

So, with that, if external charging is something that could be appropriate for your situation, then please do get in touch with us. We have all sorts of solutions, either already available or things that we're working on.

As Jan mentioned, just a quick reminder: our next webinar is on the 27th of February, focusing on legal obligations, with Matthew Quinn from Capsticks. So, more information will be coming out on that.

That's it from us. Huge thanks to Gemma and Stacey for sharing today, and for the effort they've put in – absolutely outstanding. And of course, thanks to Jan and Kabbe for your support with the session.