Understanding your Fusebox

Introduction

Your fusebox, otherwise known as a consumer unit, is best regarded as the electrical working hub of your home. Would you know what to do if your lights went out, or there was an electrical emergency in your home?

Indeed, do you know where to find your consumer unit? Many householders don't.

Familiarising yourself with your consumer unit

It is worth your while locating your consumer unit before it becomes a necessity. Consumer units are generally found either underneath the stairs, in hallways or in an outside cupboard so check these locations first.

Electrical Experts - offer testing and inspections for landlords and home owners:-

Visual Inspection	*A visual inspection of the property, with a report of its condition provided*
EICR (Domestic Electrical Safety Inspection)	*A full inspection and testing of circuits in the property, with a report of its condition and test schedule provided*
PAT (Portable Appliance Testing)	*Testing of items that are plugged into electrical outlets. (washing machines, kettles, tumble dryers etc)*

Making Access Easy

Consumer units at various heights – commonly underneath stairs they are located at floor level. Try to keep the area around consumer units clear of household items so you can easily access the switches on your consumer unit should you need to.

Similarly consumer units in hallways are located higher up on a wall, so consider how you would access it should you need to. It is not recommended to stand on a chair to reach it, so you may like to consider storing a set of stepladders nearby in order to reach the switches.

Understanding the basic switches on a consumer unit

There are three things that are useful to know about which you will find on your fusebox:

- Main Switch
- Residual Current Devices (RCD)
- Circuit Breakers (or fuses)

The Main Switch

The most important switch to familiarise yourself with is what is known as the main switch. This is the switch which simply switches your home electrics on or off. In the event of a problem with your electrics, you need to switch the main switch into the off position. This protects your and your family from electric shock or injury. The main switch is the large red switch commonly found on the left hand side of consumer units.

RCD

An RCD is a device fitted on consumer units fitted in recent years. RCD's have been responsible for saving many lives as it cuts the electricity if a fault develops with an appliances, if someone in the household accidentally touches a live cable or any other electrical problem is discovered.

Finding out if your home has RCD protection is not difficult. Look for a T or Test button on your consumer unit. If you do have RCD protection in your home it is important that you test your electricity switches off when you press the test button.

It is recommended to test your RCD at least once every 3 months. If your electricity does not go off when the Test button is pressed, it is important to contact a qualified and registered electrician asap as this indicates a problem with your electricity.

Circuit Breakers

The row of switches found on your consumer unit are the circuit breakers. These offer protection from the dangers of electricity – they are more effective than a fuse, and less effective than an RCD. If your find your lights go off, then chances are it is a circuit breaker that has 'tripped'.

If you look at your consumer unit, you will find that one of the switches will be in the 'off' position. Simply switching the switch back to the 'on' position will re-instate power to the lights.

Fuses

Some older style fuse boxes have fuses in place of circuit breakers. Known as rewireable fuses, the fuse is effectively a wire that runs between 2 screws. If an electrical fault or overload runs through the wire, it creates heat which melts the wire. This action effectively breaks the circuit by disconnecting the faulty circuit and hopefully preventing electric shock or injury.

Don't ignore tripping

If you find that your electrics are tripping often, this could indicate a problem with your wiring in your home. Continuously re-setting the circuit breaker will be causing more costly damage to the wiring. If tripping is becoming a problem in your home, it is important you consult a qualified and registered electrician who can investigate the problem further.

When an upgrade may be necessary

There are many old fuseboxes in properties and they may seem to be working correctly. Some fuse boxes have been in situ since the 1960's making them nearly 60 years old! However it is worth while considering an upgrade in order for your household to benefit from the latest electrical regulations and protection.

If your fusebox has a wooden back, cast iron switches or different types of fuses then this often means an upgrade would be highly recommended by your electrician. This is so you can be certain that your consumer unit will protect you in an electrical emergency.

Similarly if you do not have any RCD protection, then an upgrade would be worth your while.

Consumer unit safety

Consumer unit upgrades should always be carried out by a qualified and registered electrician. Never compromise your safety by attempting to do it yourself. Additionally, the installation of a consumer unit must be carried out in accordance with the Part P building regulations. Your electrician must give you a Part P certificate which confirms that the consumer unit has been installed in accordance to these recommendations.