

Client Brief- Health and Safety in Empty Buildings

Overview

Vacant buildings still need attention and maintenance. Health and safety laws still apply to most situations. When a building is empty the risk of accidents causing injury to both authorised and unauthorised visitors, maintenance and security staff can increase. Vandalism, theft, fire and other damage may be issues with health and safety implications. It is essential to ensure your responsibilities as a building owner, landlord or tenant continue to be met.

Aspects to Consider

General Arrangements

- Notify your insurer that the building will be unoccupied. They may require arrangements for heating, regular inspections, security etc. to be put into place.
- Seal any letterboxes and have your mail redirected to another appropriate address. If letterboxes cannot be sealed, fit an enclosed metal box inside and have it emptied at least weekly.
- Review and update risk assessments to reflect the building being vacant. This should include risks to anyone who may visit the premises to carry out maintenance etc. Also consider any hazards to trespassers, children or the emergency services who may enter the site.
- Think about any health risks e.g. legionnaires disease, Weil's disease, asbestos etc when reviewing risk assessments and controls.
- Isolation of utilities (water, electricity, gas, Wi-Fi) may be considered, however make sure it is safe to do so and this doesn't cause any problems for other building users or make the situation potentially worse (e.g. water stagnation, fire protection, security)
- Control access to the premises and record visitors in and out. Prevent, if possible, access to the premises by persons on their own (lone workers) Where this is unavoidable e.g. a lone security guard, ensure that lone working controls are part of your risk assessment actions.
- Without compromising fire exit doors, aim to make the site and building(s) as physically secure as possible. In particular, maintain fences and gates in good secure condition
- Vacant premises attract children. Take all necessary reasonable measures to keep them out and protect them from any significant inherent dangers within your buildings or their grounds.

Hygiene and waste

- Check for and clear any unnecessary contents, waste etc. Often employees leave food in fridges, kitchens and in their desks, make sure this is removed and disposed of to avoid pests and the need to deep clean storage.
- Empty external waste bins and secure them well away from buildings. Place any waste skips as far away from buildings as possible and in any case at least 10 metres away (unless they are a totally enclosed, lockable, all-metal type). Remove skips as soon as possible.

Fire Safety

- If you are responsible for LPG and heating oil etc. storage, make sure these are kept secure/locked. Don't allow vegetation to grow up around them and check for leaks regularly, in line with supplier recommendations. If the premises are not going to be used in the longer term, consider having them drained by the supplier.
- Make sure combustible materials are properly stored, especially if kept outside, and maintain security checks, CCTV and alarm coverage.
- Turn off all electrical items at sockets, including printers, PCs, kettles etc.
- Remotely monitored fire-detection and automatic sprinkler systems should be kept operational. Some sprinkler systems (e.g. those which are water-filled all year round) need a minimum temperature to be maintained inside the building. Check with your sprinkler maintenance company for requirements. Make sure stop and drain valves are secured in their normal working position by padlocked steel chains, not just leather straps.
- The Fire Protection Association publication "*Code of practice for the protection of empty buildings – Fire safety and security*" contains general advice and a useful management checklist. This can be downloaded [here](#).

Water Hygiene

- To avoid issues with Legionella and other water hygiene problems, water must not be allowed to stagnate within the water system. As a general principle, outlets on hot and cold-water systems should be used at least once a week to maintain a degree of water flow and minimise the chances of stagnation.
- To manage the risks during non-occupancy, consideration should be given to implementing a suitable flushing regime or other measures such as draining the system if it is to remain vacant for long periods. This [video](#) describes how flushing may be completed.
- Maintaining the services of a water hygiene company is recommended, here is a [link](#) to the Legionella Control Association.