

Property Owner's Guide to Vacant Property Security

Introduction

At any one time there are a considerable number of vacant commercial properties throughout the country. Without adequate protection these properties can be subject to misuse and either deliberate or unintentional damage. The provision of good physical protection, alarm systems and other such security solutions can help minimise and often prevent misuse and damage to these properties.

Vacant buildings are at heightened risk from fire, deterioration and criminal activity. The reputation of property owners can be damaged and relations with neighbours put under strain. In addition, insurance premiums for long-term vacant properties can often be high unless those responsible can show they have taken a broad range of sensible precautions. Arson is responsible for more than half of the known causes of fire damage in commercial and industrial property. It is very important to take every possible step to minimise fire risks. Owners and managers of vacant property have a 'duty of care' to anyone entering the building.

The following provides best practice on vacant property management.

Vacant Property Management

One of the most important first actions for owners is to allocate clear responsibility for all aspects of vacant property management. This is an important role and includes managing the shutdown of the building, conducting a risk assessment and reducing different types of risk. Property owners must also exercise a 'duty of care' to anyone entering the premises from trespassers to members of the emergency services.

Key management responsibilities and tasks:

Insurance

- Inform insurer that property is vacant.
- Check and comply with policy requirements and keep adequate records.

Risk Assessment

Undertake appropriate risk assessments such as compliance with:

- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.
- Health and safety legislation.
- Environmental legislation.
- Public liability legislation.
- Structural and equipment hazards.
- Check structure of building and undertake survey if required.
- Conduct security assessment (see over).

Inform Other Parties

- Inform police and fire services of building occupancy status, including temporary tenancies.
- Account for all keys and inform police and local fire brigade of all key holders (not all forces hold keyholder details).
- Inform local authorities if applicable.
- Seek the co-operation of neighbours in adjacent buildings; they can be very useful in reporting unauthorised entry.

Building Preparation

- Turn off all water supplies at mains except for sprinklers; drain systems down.
- Turn off all gas supplies at mains unless continuous heating required.
- Turn off all electrical supplies except as required for the functioning of heating alarm and detection systems.
- Remove all combustible materials and hazardous items.
- Remove any building contents which might attract thieves.
- Reduce unwanted attention by stopping postal deliveries.
- Clean off graffiti.
- Maintain an appearance of continued use if possible.

Security/Protection

Assessment

The security status of a vacant property should first be assessed. The following should be reviewed:

- Current state of property.
- State of current security measures.
- State of current fire detection measures.
- Is the power supply still functioning (for alarms)?
- State of current perimeter protection.
- Is the property of high value so high-level security is required?
- Could the property be subject to potential repeated attacks implying increased security measures?
- Are all openings/letterboxes sealed.

Consideration

A combination of the following security measures should then be considered:

- Perimeter fencing and gates.
- Close off access to car parks.
- Overnight movement-activated lighting.
- Employ night watchmen or security guards.
- Anti-climbing paint.
- Secure current doors/windows.
- Removable steel shutter security.
- Permanent steel screen security.
- Transparent polymer screening.
- Mains powered temporary intruder alarm system.
- Battery powered temporary intruder alarm system
- CCTV.
- Net curtains.
- Seal letterboxes and openings.

Maintenance

- Carry out weekly inspections to check the key points listed in this guide.
- Maintain all fire and security equipment in good working order; test regularly.
- Control any work done by contractors for fire risk.
- Maintain fire/smoke alarms/sprinklers.

Contractor Organisations

- Contractors should be reputable companies that understand the implications of vacant properties; check credentials.
- Security contractors should be accredited to British Standard BS7858.
- Insurance companies may insist on specific requirements for contractors; check credentials.
- BSIA members are best suited to complete work and credentials are already checked.
- Employ vacant property security specialists who provide 24/7 services for all of the above requirements in one call; check credentials.

Useful Sources of Information

Bibliography

- The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.
- The Occupiers Liability Acts 1957 and 1984.
- Code of Practice for the Protection of Unoccupied Buildings, Fire Protection Association, 1995.
- BSIA Code of Practice for Physical Protection in Vacant Property, December 2007.
- BS3621: Specification for Thief Resistant Locks.
- BS7499: 2002 Code of Practice for Static Site, Guarding, Mobile Patrol Services.
- BS7858: 2006 Security Screening of Personnel and Individuals Employed.

Organisations

Arson Prevention Bureau

51 Gresham Street, London EC2V 7HQ. 020 7216 7522

British Security Industry Association (BSIA)

Kirkham House, John Comyn Drive, Worcester WR3 7NS.
0845 389 3889 www.bsia.co.uk

Fire Protection Association (FPA)

London Road, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire,
GL56 0RH. 01608 812 500

The RISC Authority

(Formerly The Insurers' Fire Research Strategy Scheme ('InFiReS') and the Insurers' Property Crime Research Group ('IPCRes')).

National Security Inspectorate (NSI)

Sentinel House, 5 Reform Road, Maidenhead SL6 8BY. 01628 637512

Security Systems Alarm Inspection Board (SSAIB).

The Smoke Houses, Cliffords Fort, North Shields, Tyne & Wear
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