

Unoccupied Premises

Understanding the Risk

Unoccupied premises are an inescapable factor in the commercial property market. Unoccupancy may be long or short term, and often occurs prior to sale or refurbishment. Fires starting in unoccupied premises feature prominently in loss statistics. Causes of fire are mainly arson-related, but also include electrical faults in fixed wiring. In addition, theft of contents and fixtures and fittings, vandalism, occupation by squatters or travellers are common. Water damage to empty buildings is a high risk due to inadequate maintenance, especially when routine site inspections are not carried out.

The hazards presented by unoccupied buildings need to be adequately risk assessed and controlled to eliminate, reduce or control them. This is important to protect the financial status of your business. You must also meet your responsibilities to minimise the risk of injury to third parties, including children who may illicitly use the site as a playground.



Controlling the Hazards

Protection of unoccupied premises is achieved by assessing and addressing the locality, management issues, and both the fire and security protections of the premises.

Controls generally fall into two categories which are:

Human Element - relating to the management procedures primarily aimed at reducing the likelihood of an event occurring or how to react in the event of an emergency.

Physical Element - relating to protection or design principles aimed at reducing or mitigating the effect of an event occurring or how to react to an emergency event, should an incident occur.

The following issues should be considered to create a comprehensive and integrated risk control programme:

Human Element

- Undertake risk assessments to identify hazards and develop self-inspection checklists
- Turn off all but essential services to the premises. The gas supply should be isolated, water drained down, and electricity isolated unless essential for maintaining heating, fire and/or security protections.
- Remove all rubbish and other combustible materials, both internally and externally. All fuel tanks should be purged, and temporary buildings should be removed from the site.
- Ensure that contractors are adequately controlled and supervised, particularly when hot work operations are undertaken.

- No smoking restrictions are in most countries a legal requirement. If not they should be implemented and should be brought to the attention of visitors, contractors and security personnel
- Check that the building is wind and watertight, and look for evidence of entry or vandalism
- Carry out routine documented inspections, at least at weekly intervals, and have a procedure in place to immediately remedy any issues arising

Physical Element

- Security principles should be applied to reduce the level of attraction, deter entry, and deny entry. If it does occur, detect entry, and ensure that an adequate response is made. The areas to be addressed are summarised below:
- Perimeter fencing – ensure that this is adequate to restrict access, and is maintained in good condition.
- Security lighting – effective overnight or movement-activated external lighting should be provided.
- Doors – external doors should be robust and fitted with good quality locks or padlocks. Vulnerable doors should be protected by external 1.6mm steel sheet, coach bolted through the door. Doors which are not required for access for inspection purposes should be ‘boarded up’ as detailed in windows protection below.
- Note – Protection of designated fire doors must be agreed with the local Fire Department prior to work being carried out.
- Windows – ‘boarding up’ is the preferred method of protection; this is by means of timber boards (exterior grade plywood of adequate strength, at least 18mm thick.

The plywood should be secured to the door and window frames and where appropriate to timber framing by 50mm exterior non-return or ribbed nails) or removable steel mesh screens, fitted by competent contractors. All ground floor and accessible upper floor windows should be protected. Windows are particularly vulnerable to vandalism and as entry points to criminals. Broken windows encourage further attacks, and can also allow water to enter the building.

- Manned Guarding – 24-hour manned guarding of the site may be necessary depending on the location and attractiveness of the premises.
- Intruder Alarm – existing intruder alarm protection and maintenance should be retained during unoccupancy of the premises; it is important that off-site notification arrangements are in place. Temporary alarm systems designed for unoccupied buildings are available and should be installed where there is no existing intruder alarm protection.
- Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Surveillance – existing equipment and maintenance should be retained during unoccupancy of the premises; off-site monitoring should be implemented.
- Fire protection to the premises should be maintained and retained.
- Automatic Sprinkler Protection – retain where practicable, maintain and protect from frost. Off-site monitoring should be operational. The systems should be tested weekly. If it is impracticable to retain sprinkler protection, the system should be drained and the water supplies isolated.
- Automatic Fire Alarm – existing protection and maintenance should be retained; it is important that off-site notification arrangements are in place. The system should be tested weekly.

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