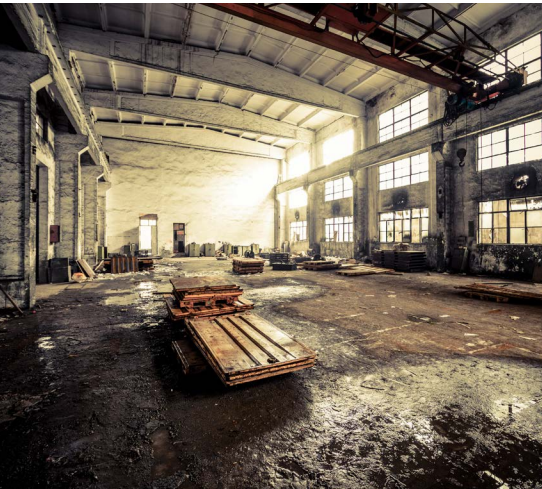


Vacant buildings



When a property is left unoccupied for some time the level of risk from certain hazards can increase.

Vandals, thieves, arsonists, squatters, fly tippers and travellers are often a lot more comfortable targeting a site that is seemingly not being used, on the basis that a property not occupied is also a property not properly secured.

To an extent, they may be right to believe this as some owners mistakenly think there's nothing in a vacant building that could tempt intruders.

Some types of vandals and arsonists, such as children, may just be in it for the thrill, while others may have intentions of harming your business or just simply looking for shelter. You can also get organised thieves that will strip a building of materials like copper wire or pipes which can then be sold as scrap. The costs following theft of such materials may also be higher than their actual value due to the potential for significant damage to the structure as a result of the thieves' activities.

Squatters, the homeless or travellers looking for somewhere to live may not leave your site in the state in which they found them, leading to expensive clean-up costs, and additionally may put your premises at risk by starting fires to keep warm.

You also need to consider that, even though they are not permitted, and however many warning signs you put up, UK law can make a property owner liable if someone is harmed due to hazards on the premises.

Key actions to safeguard vacant properties

- When considering how best to secure a vacant building, don't forget that it's just as vulnerable to risks like electrical fires, water damage and exposure to wind as any other property.

- Remember that fire, health and safety and environmental risk assessments are as necessary for vacant buildings as they are for occupied ones. Update any risk assessments whenever any circumstances relating to the building change (e.g. if it becomes occupied).
 - While you should make sure that physical security measures are strong enough to prevent trespass and damage, they also can't make it difficult for anyone within to safely escape in the event of an emergency, such as a fire.
 - For your health and safety risk assessment, consider what hazards might arise while it's left unoccupied. As an example, water left stagnant can soon harbour Legionella, or, where vermin are on site, leptospirosis bacteria.
- Get all relevant locks (including padlocks) to gates, external shutters and external doors changed if the premises are newly acquired and were, at any point in the recent past, occupied.
- Clear out any unnecessary contents and, in particular, remove any combustible items (including fixtures/fittings) that might provide fuel for a fire.
 - Letter boxes should be sealed up and mail redirected and/or the inside of the letter box can be fitted with an enclosed steel box and emptied weekly.
- Have any oil tanks emptied and make sure that the oil is disposed of legally.
- Empty external waste bins and secure them well away from the building. Similarly, skips (that are ideally a totally enclosed and lockable all-metal type) should be removed at the earliest opportunity and, until then, placed as far away from buildings as possible (at least 10 metres away).
- Ensure that valve hoods fitted to external LPG tank controls are closed and locked shut and take measures to keep the tanks stands clear of vegetation.
- Other than where they're required for fire, security, safety, or environmental systems, if possible, isolate the gas, electricity and water sources which supply the building.
 - Have water supplies, except those for operational fire sprinkler and other fire suppression systems (that you have checked are safe to leave on), drained down.
- If it's necessary to keep parts of the electrical installation in use, have those inspected and tested by a competent electrical contractor as you usually would.
- Where sprinkler stop and drain valves are secured in their normal working position by leather straps and padlocks, these should be changed for padlocked steel chains.
- Make sure that unauthorised vehicles can't easily access the site.
- For larger sites where security guards have been provided, but no existing CCTV system is available to help them monitor the grounds, consider hiring a portable CCTV or movement detection system to aid them.
- Arrange for unguarded buildings (which are in a safe condition) to be visited at least weekly, so that their condition and security can be checked.

- As much as possible, don't allow anyone to visit vacant premises alone. As part of your health and safety risk assessments, you should have considered the risks to 'lone workers' and introduced control measures where this risk can't be eliminated.
 - Have measures in place to control which individuals have access to the premises and record visitors entering and exiting.
- Inform your insurance broker as soon as you know that one of your buildings, or even just part of one, is to become vacant or disused and tell them if you are considering leaving heating appliances or a heating system on in the building (or on standby, connected to a frost-stat).