

# CHURCHES AND HEALTH AND SAFETY

## Guidance note

from the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches  
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Churches are not exempt from Health and Safety legislation and Local Authorities are responsible for enforcing health and safety legislation in churches. There are a vast array of issues connected with church premises and activities include such matters as working with children, food handling, building work, and working at height. Every church should carry out a risk assessment in order to identify hazards (anything that can cause harm) and to identify means of reducing risks (the chance somebody will be harmed by a hazard). Often simple precautions and preventative measures involving little expense can substantially reduce the risk of damage to or loss of property and injury to persons, most of which occur through trips or falls.

Churches insured with Ecclesiastical are provided with a model health and safety policy and Guidance Notes, and additional sources of information and guidance are listed at the end of this document.

The following give an idea of some general precautions that should be taken:

**Solo workers** such as churchwardens, organist, cleaner or a flower arranger, should not undertake potentially hazardous tasks alone e.g. lamp changing.

### Emergency exit from the building

When the building is in use all final exit doors should be easily opened from the inside without the use of a key. On special occasions, when large numbers may be present, temporary Fire Exit signs should be in place. There may need to be escape/emergency lighting available, particularly in first floor tower rooms, bell ringing chambers and staircases. A fire routine should be established.

### Footpaths

Regular maintenance is required to ensure these remain free from obstruction, not slippery and reasonably level. Ramps and steps need particular attention with handrails and/or lighting provided if hazardous. Bear in mind the difficulty the frail, elderly, disabled, those with push chairs or on crutches may have in negotiating access to and from the church. However, many paved surfaces are of historic importance. When this is the case a balance between conservation and safety will need to be achieved – possibly through the provision of a new path in addition to that existing, repairing the historic path, or providing an appropriate handrail.



## Steps, stairs and ladders

Bell tower steps, steps down to boiler rooms and access ladders should all be inspected at least annually. Uneven and worn treads are a positive danger and may require remedial attention: wherever possible handrails should be provided. (Very effective handrails can be made for winding stone staircases using heavy duty alkathene pipe and strong tubular fixings.) External steps down to boiler rooms should not be neglected and these require frequent and careful attention to remove moss etc. Access to any area from which a fall may occur (e.g. steps up to rood screen; deep drain round base of church) should be carefully restricted or made impossible.

## Boundary walls, fences and lychgate

The boundary of the churchyard should be walked at least two or three times a year in order to check for leaning pillars, posts and sections of wall and, where appropriate, to ensure that the structure and roof covering of the lychgate are sound. Early attention to defects may prevent costly repairs later on.



## Gravestones and tombs

Although the maintenance of stones/tombs is the responsibility of the deceased's family, the church is ultimately responsible for any injury if the family does not carry out its obligations. A falling grave stone can cause injury or fatality. It is, therefore, important that all stones/tombs are regularly inspected to ensure public safety. Repairs to all historic monuments, listed or not, need to be carried out by an experienced stonemason. Grants may be available for the repair of listed tombs/headstones.

## Trees

Trees can cause serious damage in a variety of ways. During windy conditions they may fall onto or lash against the building and rocking of the roots can cause collapse of the boundary walls. Leaves and twigs block gutters and underground drains. Roots removing moisture from clay soils can lead to shrinkage of the clay causing foundations to move and walls to crack. Branches falling onto visitors, neighbouring property or cars are a frequent source of claims. Regular inspections of trees, at least every six months, should be considered essential and at least every five years by a tree surgeon.

## Drainage

Special arrangements should be in place for clearance of snow and ice from valley gutters and the tower roof during wintry conditions. Ensure that water shed from the buildings drains away from the foundations, but not onto paths.

## Roof covering and structure

Visual inspections (binoculars come in useful) of the external walls and roof coverings should be carried out at frequent intervals to discover any defects requiring attention at an early stage. Look out particularly for loose or defective pinnacles, parapets, roof crosses and slipped or missing slates. Inspections should be made after every period of stormy weather. Beware - do not test pinnacles by rocking them.

## Floor coverings

Defective floor coverings, carpets and trailing flexes from heaters etc. are not acceptable and should be removed or made safe immediately upon discovery.

## Flammable liquids and polishes

If it is necessary to use any of these they should be kept in minimum quantities in well ventilated areas or within a lockable metal cabinet. Paraffin or petrol for lawn mowers must not be stored within the church.

## Fire

Portable electric heaters with trailing flexes should not be used. Ideally all socket outlets should be 30 mA RCD protected, particularly those sockets which supply other portable instruments (e.g. guitars). Again ideally, movable heaters using gas cylinders should not be used – vandals can easily release the gas and throw in a match; the water vapour from these heaters also damages the fabric of the church. Spare or empty cylinders must not be stored in the church as they explode in a fire and cause danger to life and prevent effective fire-fighting. Fire extinguishers should be of the correct kind, serviced annually and easily accessible.

## Bells

These must be left in the 'down' position when not in use during the working week between 7am Monday and 6 pm Friday with Public Holidays excepted. They should not be left in the up position unless access is restricted and warning notices posted.



### Further Sources of Information:

Ecclesiastical Insurance website [www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters](http://www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters)

Health and Safety Executive 'Five Steps to Risk Assessment' (Free from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA; 01787 881165; [www.hsebooks.com](http://www.hsebooks.com) to download a pdf version)