

Church SAFETY

ChurchSafety InfoSheet:

Why Health and Safety?

For Churches and Places of Worship

These days, there is increasing pressure to provide for people's safety in all walks of life. Health and Safety is not just for shops, offices and factories: Churches and Places of Worship are included too.

So what is Health and Safety about?

To put it simply, Health and Safety is about preventing harm to people. It is about complying with Health and Safety Law and fulfilling a Duty of Care to members of the public.



A selection of commonly used Safety Signs

It can happen all too easily:

- ⚠️ Someone cleaning the building receives an electric shock from a faulty vacuum cleaner
- ⚠️ A child could be poisoned by drinking cleaning fluid that is not locked away
- ⚠️ A candle could topple and set fire to nearby books
- ⚠️ A plumber could be harmed by asbestos insulation in an old boiler
- ⚠️ An elderly person could slip on a wet floor

There are many different ways in which someone could be harmed in Church or Place of Worship, from an accident from working at height through to work-related stress or illness. Health and Safety considers all aspects of safety, health and welfare for staff, volunteers, members of the congregation and other members of the public.

For many Churches and Places of Worship, despite popular belief, Health and Safety is not over-complicated and needs only a bit of time. Many of the precautions that are required are either free or low-cost.

The most important thing to realise is that everywhere is different – different size premises with different congregations, each with its own unique risk. Health and Safety is not about eliminating risk but taking a balanced view to reduce the risk.

Health and Safety Law

Businesses have been dealing with Health and Safety for many years now owing to the various regulations that exist. Many Churches and Places of Worship have been slow to follow, mostly because many don't see their Place of Worship as a Workplace. There is also a myth that you need to employ five or more people before you need to do anything – this is definitely not the case!

The main piece of legislation that covers Health and Safety is the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. There are a large number of regulations that have been made under this Act covering certain key topics, such as chemical safety and work equipment. Many of the titles of the regulations might not automatically seem to fit in with Churches and Places of Worship, but these regulations need to be considered.

In a similar way, fire safety is covered by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which replaced the Fire Precautions Act 1971 in October 2006. This Order places duties on the “responsible person” for non-domestic premises to ensure that fire precautions and procedures are in place.

The duties under Health and Safety Law and Fire Safety Law are mandatory, no matter what size the premises or congregation is. It does not matter how old the building is or how many times per week the building is being used. The same general requirements exist for all Churches and Places of Worship.

The requirements of regulations can seem bewildering. The Health and Safety Commission produce a number of “Approved Codes of Practise” (known as “ACOP” for short). These documents give an official interpretation of the law and following them is a good way of showing that you have complied with the law. There is no such defence of doing nothing!

Many parts of Health and Safety Law are based on the principle of reducing the likelihood of someone being harmed to a low level. This makes Risk Assessment such an important and useful tool for Health and Safety. Risk Assessment is a fact-finding exercise used in Health and Safety to help decide the chance of injury or fire.

For Churches and Places of Worship, Health and Safety Law is enforced by the local authority (usually the Environmental Health Department of the local District, Borough or Unitary Authority). Fire Safety Law is enforced by the local Fire and Rescue Service. Both of these agencies have the power to access the premises to perform an inspection. In some cases, this might result in an "improvement notice" (requiring some actions to be taken within a certain time scale) or a "prohibition notice" (requiring something to cease until people's safety is assured).

Health and Safety law is a specific section of "Criminal Law" in the UK. Failure to comply can see a person fined or imprisoned (although this is usually only a last resort).

"Duty of Care" and liability

Many people are currently concerned with their liability in case of accidents. Although we can insure against the financial risk, we must still take reasonable care for people's safety. This is known as "Duty of Care".

Should there be an accident, the person suffering the injuries might wish to take legal action for compensation. In the civil courts, it would need to be established that the Duty of Care has been fulfilled. Where people are employed there needs to be suitable "Employers Liability Insurance", it is also possible to insure against "Public Liability" but neither of these means that safety precautions can be ignored.

Even without this Duty of Care, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act itself requires employers to ensure the safety of people who are not employees. Similarly, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order requires that the fire safety of all "relevant persons" is considered. This includes the Sunday congregation and any member of the public visiting the premises in the week as well as paid personnel and volunteers.

The general safety precautions that are put into place for staff and volunteers will generally ensure that the Duty of Care is fulfilled. However, it is important to remember that it cannot be assumed that any member of the public has any knowledge of safety procedures in your situation. In this respect, Places of Worship can learn from other places of public assembly such as theatres and cinemas.

Moral obligations

Despite the legal requirements for Health and Safety, there is also a moral objective for ensuring people's safety. This is certainly not a minor objective where Churches and Places of Worship are concerned. Consider the bad press that could be created over an accident and how that could reflect upon a congregation.

Most people now expect that their safety is considered as they enter a building. There is some evidence that people are now more likely to take legal action should they suffer an injury, and Churches and Places of Worship are by no means exempt from this. There are many differing views on the so-called "compensation culture" but it is nevertheless important to have reasonable safety precautions in place.

Ensuring the Health and Safety of everyone is plainly common sense and every Church and Place of Worship must take action.

Responsibilities

One of the largest issues for many Churches and Places of Worship is deciding who is responsible for Health and Safety. Most of the regulations assume that the person having overall responsibility for Health and Safety is the person having overall control of the premises. This might be the Chairman of a board of trustees or the minister or pastor. Where there is any doubt, the exact responsibility must be identified in the Health and Safety Policy (although this does not mean that an individual can remove all responsibility for safety matters).

In some situations, one person might have taken on some aspects of Health and Safety, such as testing the fire alarm and keeping paperwork up-to-date. This individual is not the only person responsible for Health and Safety – everyone has a role to play.

Every member of staff and every volunteer is responsible for their own Health and Safety and the safety of others through their own actions and omissions. Should an individual have responsibility over a group of people (such as, for example, a choirmaster), this person is likely to have responsibility for the safety of this group of people.

What causes accidents?

There are many different things that could cause accidents and some common ones are:

- Stored equipment which could fall
- Damaged carpets and loose rugs that someone could trip over
- Wet floors that someone could slip on
- Hot surfaces and heating systems that could burn someone
- Electrical wiring and equipment which could cause an electric shock
- Chemicals (including cleaning fluids) which could cause a chemical burn

There are also a number of things that could cause a fire in your Church or Place of Worship, including:

- Heating systems
- Electrical wiring
- Cooking equipment
- Arson

The most important thing to do is think about the different hazards in your Church or Place of Worship and decide what you can do to reduce the chance of someone being harmed – this is called Risk Assessment.

Risk Assessment

The first stage is to walk around your building and note the things that could cause harm to people, which are known as hazards. The Risk is the chance that someone might be harmed by the hazard.

Once you have made a note of the hazards, work out how many people are at risk from these hazards and the chance of them being harmed. You should note down if disabled people could be at risk (which helps you comply with the Disability Discrimination Act), along with children and babies. It is common that the public could be at risk, but in some the hazard might only affect staff.

You then need to use your judgement to decide if you are doing enough to reduce the risks to a low level. If you think a risk is too high (for example, it could affect a large number of people), ask yourself what you can do to reduce the risk. Think about any accidents you have had in the past as this helps gauge if you are doing enough.

Depending on the hazard, there are many options open to you to reduce, control or remove the hazard. You are likely to find that the smallest, simplest and cheapest things are usually the most effective. It is not about eliminating all hazards, but reducing the risk in a sensible way.

The most important thing you need to do is free – you must be aware of how Health and Safety affects you in your Church or Place of Worship and think about how you can reduce the risks.

Reducing and controlling the risks

The first port of call in improving Health and Safety is to reduce the risks. Many of the things you need to do are very simple and are common sense. Take the following examples:

1. Store equipment in a safe way – don't stack boxes on top of cupboards or on high shelves.
2. Carry goods carefully, being careful not to twist and jar the back. Don't carry too much at a time.
3. Don't trail cables along gangways and aisles. Avoid using multiplug adaptors and extension leads.
4. Wet floors can be slippery – display a fold-away "wet floor" sign (as used in supermarkets) when cleaning floors.
5. Lock away all chemicals, including cleaning fluids, when they are not needed.
6. Provide disposable gloves to people who clean your building. Paper towels are a hygienic way to dry hands.
7. Put books and papers away from equipment that could get hot, like heaters and boilers.
8. Place candles in flame proof holders and don't leave them unattended. Don't place tea-lights directly on surfaces – always use a suitable holder.
9. Ensure the electrical installation is safe by having it inspected. Portable Appliances should be tested for electrical safety frequently.
10. Keep fire exits and corridors clear and don't chain fire exit doors shut. Don't prop open fire and smoke doors.

What equipment do I need?

To start off with, the basic equipment you need includes:

1. A good quality first aid kit, which should be large enough for the number of people that use your building.
2. An accident book (which needs to comply with the Data Protection Act – this will be marked on the book).
3. A Health and Safety Law poster and a policy statement on display.
4. Fire extinguishers, which need to be commercial quality extinguishers.
5. Exit signs that comply with the latest regulations (which include the moving person symbol, see picture at the bottom of this page).

You must also look after this equipment. Arrange regular servicing for fire alarms and fire extinguishers. You also need to test other equipment like emergency lighting and check your first aid kit from time to time.

There are also other things like fire alarms and emergency lighting that you might need and this depends on your Risk Assessment. This InfoSheet is provided as a starting point for Health and Safety in your Church or Place of Worship.

Produced by ChurchSafety

Improving the understanding of Health and Safety in UK Places of Worship

www.churchsafety.org.uk

Need further help?

You can get advice about Health and Safety from your Environmental Health Department, which is part of your local District or Borough Council and fire safety advice is available from your local Fire Brigade.

If you are part of a larger organisation, there is usually someone you can contact to get advice and information from.

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This leaflet includes some general information on Health and Safety that is intended to provide the reader with a general understanding of Health and Safety as it applies to Churches and Places of Worship. This InfoSheet (including the examples given) is not a full interpretation of Health and Safety Law.

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