

Safeguarding of Building Interiors During Vacancy

■ **OBJECTIVE**

To provide guidance on the safeguarding of the fabric and architectural features of historic buildings during periods of vacancy.

■ **POLICY CONTEXT**

The protection of the built heritage is a key objective set out in the Council's local plans and Historic Scotland's "Memorandum of Guidance on Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas".

■ **SCOPE OF GUIDANCE**

This guideline applies to historic buildings on a city-wide basis.

■ **STATUTORY AND OTHER REQUIREMENTS**

Local authorities have a statutory obligation to ensure that listed buildings are maintained to an adequate level. Applications for planning permission or listed building consent involving vacant historic buildings with interiors which may be at risk should be accompanied by a full schedule and photographic record of architectural features. This may be required prior to consideration of the application or as a condition of consent. It should also be noted that it is the responsibility of the owner of the property to ensure that architectural fittings are adequately protected. Enforcement action may be taken to ensure the reinstatement of stolen items.

1. Survey

In cases of likely long-term vacancy, where the building is being “mothballed”, an essential first stage is a survey to identify structural problems or rot conditions. Where rot is found, early measures should be taken to ensure eradication. Sufficient details should be recorded to allow the building to be taken into effective management and enable its future to be accurately monitored. The execution of protective works and regular re-inspection are additional essential requirements. Notification of vacancy to insurers, the local authority and the police should be standard practice.

2. Preventative Measures

- a) Avoidance of water ingress and flooding from blocked gutters, gullies and drains is essential. Normal maintenance coupled with regular re-inspection and clearance are required.
- b) Windstill conditions encourage rot and mould growth. Internal air circulation can be increased by lifting a number of floorboards in each room. Earth and debris should be removed from above damp-proof courses.
- c) The structure should be adequately supported by shoring, scaffolding or hydraulic jacks, wherever this is considered necessary. Tell-tales and other monitoring devices should be fitted, inspected regularly and results logged.
- d) Removal and disposal of rubbish to prevent fires, discourage vermin and avoid bridging of damp courses is essential. Means of ventilation should be provided to minimise the chances of rot, in such a way as to avoid entry of vermin.
- e) All services should be isolated. Pipework, cisterns and taps should be drained down. Gas and electrical services should be terminated outside the building to minimise the risk of fire. Consideration should also be given to stripping out redundant services and removal of damp affected plaster.
- f) The interior should be thoroughly disinfected to discourage rot, mould and other organic growth.

3. Security

Boarding-up should be carefully done to deter entry. However, this should not conflict with the need to maintain ventilation and regular inspection from the outside. Vertical timbers with a gap left between them or drilled sheet materials may be used. On street elevations there is a case for not boarding up as this advertises that the building is empty; any broken panes of glass should be reinstated quickly. Windows which are not boarded-up can be screwed securely with the windows left slightly open for ventilation. Other measures include: temporary external security floodlighting, coating rainwater downpipes with anti-burglar slippery finishes, the retention of curtains and blinds to simulate occupation, automatically switched internal lighting and the provision of a caretaker service. The level of security precautions will depend on the quality of the interior and the likely cost of reinstatement following possible vandalism. Arrangements for checking security must be made by regular inspection, possibly by a specialist security firm.

4. Valuable Fittings and Fixtures

Architectural theft is an increasing problem, and property which contains interior work of some quality should not be left unoccupied for any long period of time. Where vacancy cannot be avoided, stringent security measures should be adopted and a record made of items, such as doors, door furniture, door pediments, fireplaces, chimney pieces, balustrades and panelling which might attract the attentions of a thief (discreet security marking and photocopying vulnerable items is recommended).

In cases where there is concern that even the best security measures may not be satisfactory to prevent loss of architectural fittings, consideration may be given to their temporary removal to a secure store. This will normally always require listed building consent and will be subject to conditions relating to recording, method of removal, form of storage and time period for the temporary removal.

■ REASONED JUSTIFICATION

It is an objective of conservation policy to minimise the number of historic buildings becoming vacant, but nevertheless some degree of vacancy is unavoidable. In these circumstances, in order to assist in safeguarding historic properties, the procedures set out in this guideline are recommended as an outline of good practice.

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