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KNOW HOW FIVE POINT PLAN

The risks to unattended or unoccupied properties are far greater than for occupied premises.

Vacant properties are more vulnerable to vandalism, arson or the effects of extreme weather. But one of the most common problems in recent years has been the growth of trespassers.

Unauthorised visitors range from the curious to the criminal, but trespassers can still sue owners if they sustain an injury on the site. Anyone who owns or controls unoccupied buildings or grounds has a legal duty of care to protect people on the sites from foreseeable harm, and this duty even extends to people who are trespassing.

● **Urban explorers:** These explore man-made structures, usually abandoned ruins or hidden structures. They are a growing 'community', with The Urban Explorer website attracting more visitors and a higher web ranking than real estate giant BNP Paribas. The unspoken rule of urban exploring is "take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints", but many individuals may have other intentions.

● **Vacant sites are a magnet for children:** During summer we run a campaign to warn of the risks of children climbing into derelict properties in the school holidays – 'Don't Goof on the Roof'. It is estimated that more than 3,000 young people take risks every week by trespassing on derelict buildings or empty building sites, and each year there are reports of injuries ranging from the mild to the serious – and occasionally to the fatal.

● **Unauthorised encampments:** The UK government consultation



VACANT PROPERTIES

NO TRESPASSERS

Although squatting of homes is illegal, vacant commercial properties remain prone to invasions of several kinds, explains *Nicholas Bye*

this year into unauthorised trespasser encampments reported record numbers of caravans, almost tripling between 1979 and 2019. They reported significant problems created by unauthorised encampments, including criminal activity and costs to local authorities and private landowners once the encampment has moved on – estimated to be tens of millions of pounds annually.

What FMs can do to safeguard vacant buildings

Taking additional safety and security precautions to protect visitors, whether authorised or not, can pay dividends by cutting legal fees. Our inspectors carry out at least 100,000 site inspections every year and they have distilled their experience into a key five-point safety security plan:

1 Walk the site

To keep out people in the first place start with the obvious checks: perimeter entry points, fencing around the grounds, and the strength of all closed windows and doors, former coal chutes, external fire escape stairs, drainpipes, and the state of any steel screens or hoardings.

2 Check your footing

Are there any potholes, wells, lift shafts, broken glass, accessible stairs that are broken, staircases with rusty railings, access to roof tops, to guttering or to balconies?

3 Rate the risks

Is it remote or overlooked? Are there secluded access points hidden from a busy road or housing? Do trees hang over the perimeter fencing? Does the site contain items worth

stealing such as copper boilers, lead roof tiles, wiring, ancient fireplaces or heritage stone?

4 Devise a security plan

Assess how much safety and security is required, from standard steel screens through to alarm systems, guards or more technological solutions such as 24/7 remote monitored CCTV. The cost of these is usually outweighed by the expense of dealing with the aftermath of a security breach.

A more recent option is to secure vacant properties by occupation – live-in guardians. One insurer informed us that an illegal rave set up in an empty warehouse cost nearly £250,000 (split between the insurer and the owner) to rectify.

5 Consistency is key

No amount of safety planning can stop the most determined trespasser, so follow the steps above frequently for signs of attempted security breaches. Steel screens, wooden hoardings, can be prised off their hinges, chain fences can be cut, but these can be repaired fairly cheaply. **f**

f This article has been adapted from a presentation by VPS at the recent RICS annual dinner in Sheffield