



Health and Safety

Three little words which are rarely mentioned without an exasperated sigh and a roll of the eyes! However, we all want to be sure that our Church buildings are not only welcoming and spiritual, but as safe as possible for the people who use them. With the application of some common sense and by following the guidance which is available, it is quite possible to achieve this.



The trustees for a congregation are responsible for the buildings under their control, and the health and safety of people using these buildings. A manse is a private residence, and therefore does not fall into the same category as a church or church hall but, of course, should not be ignored so far as health and safety is concerned.

Collective Responsibility

The charity trustees of the congregation are responsible for health and safety issues. It should be noted that this is collective responsibility which falls on all trustees, acting as trustees. Personal liability of the individuals concerned would only arise in unusual circumstances, for example, if someone had acted in a negligent or even criminal manner, against the views of other trustees.

It is a good idea to task one or two people with the practicalities of health and safety matters, but it is important that they should feel that they have the support of their fellow trustees at all times, and not feel they have been left to shoulder the responsibility alone. They should report regularly to the other trustees and, indeed, it is recommended that 'health and safety' be included as a standing item on meeting agendas.

Inspection of the Premises

If an accident were to occur with health and safety implications, such as a fall which could easily have been prevented, the investigating body will be the local authority. As part of any investigation, they will look into whether the trustees took such steps as were reasonable to have prevented the accident. It is therefore important that the trustees are able to produce evidence that health and safety was considered, and appropriate action taken. Such evidence might take the form of items noted in Kirk Session minutes, an accident book which is kept up to date, checklists for events etc.



Some congregations have already considered this issue, and have well established procedures in place. Other congregations are not quite so far forward, and although this might seem like a big undertaking, health and safety must be tackled, and this can be done taking one step at a time.

Ideally, a group of trustees will make a tour of inspection of their premises, and write down a list of points which could be seen as health and safety issues. These might include:

- frayed carpets or rugs which could cause a trip
- fire safety - are there enough fire exits and are they kept unblocked at all times?
- gas appliances – are they safe and checked annually?
- whether safeguards are in place if anyone has to work at height, such as changing a lightbulb in a difficult to access light fitting
- the kitchen can be a fertile source of potential health and safety issues. Are there guidelines easily visible about keeping raw and cooked foods separate, washing hands before handling food etc., and has anyone undergone a basic food hygiene course?
- any asbestos in the building? An asbestos management plan will be required
- persons working alone in the building
- whether appropriate signage is in place – for example, warnings about roof spaces which are not strong enough to take the weight of an individual

Particular consideration should be given to areas used by frail or vulnerable people, such as small children.

Necessary Actions

Once the trustees have identified potential risks, the next step is to write down what is being done about them. Some will be easily dealt with - frayed electrical wires can be replaced, and sufficient equipment should be provided in the kitchen to ensure that food hygiene standards are met. Once the trustees have decided what the best course of action is to prevent an incident, they must ensure that the necessary action is carried out and keep a record of the action taken, and the date.

The law states that trustees must take steps to ensure health and safety 'so far as reasonably practicable'. It is possible that there are some risks about which there is little that can be done without interfering with the activities of church users. Trustees are not expected to go to extremes. Provided trustees can show that they have considered the level of risk and taken appropriate steps, that should be sufficient.

Further reading and resources

The Law Department of the Church of Scotland -

www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/subjects/law_circulars

The General Trustees' Department at the Church of Scotland national offices (121 George Street, Edinburgh)

The Church of Scotland Insurance Services website - www.cosic.co.uk/risk-management

The Health and Safety Executive website - www.hse.gov.uk/