

## 38. Short guide to security in your village hall

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## **A short guide to security and your village hall**

### **1. Introduction**

Incidences of crime against community buildings are low but it makes sense to undertake every effort to minimise any potential risk. Evidence from the British Crime Survey<sup>1</sup> indicates that the level of general crime is lower in rural areas, but there is a perception that crime in rural areas is rising.

Rural community buildings can be situated in the centre of their community or on the outskirts and not visible from general view. The hall's level of occupancy can also be an important factor; a busy hall with people coming and going can be less vulnerable. Whatever the situation halls can be at risk, but it is rare for village hall management committees to have to resort to taking extreme measures to protect the building.

This information sheet draws upon guidance from a number of crime reduction agencies and from the experiences of people working with hall management committees. It offers basic advice to help hall management committees put an effective security programme in place.

### **2. What are the risks?**

There are three principal risks to community buildings

- Arson
- Malicious damage/vandalism
- Theft

The best way to deal with these risks is for the hall management committee to take a proactive attitude to the physical security of the building. As with all risk assessment it is best practise to appoint a named person to take the lead for all security matters. The appointed person does not need to do all the work and take all the responsibility but he/she can retain an oversight of the issues and actions taken.

### **3. Arson**

A community building may be set on fire to cover criminal activity; it may be seen as a soft target by arsonists who believe that the building doesn't have visible security arrangements; by young people playing with lighters and matches or by people with psychiatric disorders.

The Arson Prevention Bureau<sup>2</sup> has issued guidance specifically aimed at reducing the risks of deliberate fire on places of worship, which also has some information that is relative to village halls. The following five points could form the basis of an action plan to help reduce risks:

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<sup>1</sup> Home Office - British Crime Survey 2001 - <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hosb1801.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Arson Prevention Bureau - <http://www.arsonpreventionbureau.org.uk> - Contact 020 7216 7522.  
<http://www.arsonpreventionbureau.org.uk/saveddocument/Churches.pdf>

1. Deter unauthorised access onto the site
2. Prevent unauthorised access into the building
3. Reduce the opportunity for an arsonist to start a fire
4. Reduce the scope for potential fire damage
5. Reduce subsequent losses and disruption resulting from a fire.

Some common sense points to help reduce the risks of fire would be to ensure;

- that no combustible material is left lying around i.e. papers and fabric from children's craft activities
- do not let rubbish accumulate in waste bins within the building or immediately outside i.e. site wheelie bins away from the building
- lock away matches, candles, cleaning fluids and any obvious materials that can accelerate a fire.

Letterboxes on the main entrance door present an easy way to introduce a fire into the property and cutting off the main means of escape. A metal box inside the door would be a preventative measure worth considering or alternatively fit a box to the outside wall.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 takes effect on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2006 and requires a risk assessment which should take account of all fire related risks. See **Village Hall Information Sheet 37, Fire safety in village halls.**

#### **4. Malicious damage and vandalism**

Malicious damage or vandalism is often opportunist in nature and whilst disruptive can be tackled locally with the support of the whole community; if indeed the cause is from within the community. It may just be a case of finding out what is causing the individuals to vandalise the building. Sometimes it is children who cause the damage revealing boredom as their motivation. In this case the village hall management committee should try to speak to the children's parents. **Village Hall Information Sheet 5 – Village halls, children and young people**, looks at a number of issues relating to young people which are often a concern to village hall management committees.

##### **Police presence**

There may be a police officer assigned to your village whose support you can tap into or some rural areas have a mobile police station which can help to develop relationships with the community.

##### **Preventative measures**

If the hall is in a particularly remote location rather than the centre of the village it may be advisable to have a higher level of security. This could include an intruder alarm system; even the alarm boxes on the outside of the building can make burglars think twice about attempting entry. Security lighting is always a good deterrent particularly external lighting with sensors (known as PIDs) that are activated by moving objects.

Many rural communities have a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. For more information on how to set up a scheme, contact your local Police Officer or find information at [www.neighbourhoodwatch.uk.com](http://www.neighbourhoodwatch.uk.com).

## 5. Theft

Theft from village halls tends to be opportunist and petty crime rather than large scale burglary. However, there are incidents, particularly where there may be a computer suite or perhaps a social club occupies part of the premises and it is known that alcohol is stored there.

Windows are the most common means of illegal entry and locks should therefore be installed on all accessible windows. Doors should be of substantial construction and have a 5-lever mortise deadlock or similar.

Security is important even when the building is in use. If external doors are open providing access to the whole building, it may be possible for someone to wander in unheard particularly if a noisy activity is taking place in part of the hall. If the committee is in doubt about whether certain doors should be locked they can consult their local fire officer for guidance. If children are taking part in activities in the hall then their safety also needs to be taken into account.

Some deterrents to access:

- consider planting thorny bushes along perimeter fences to deter unwanted visitors
- avoid providing climbing facilities, such as vents, near windows
- make it difficult to move wheelie bins – they are good for climbing on
- keep softwood frames well maintained otherwise the reinforced glass in them will be useless
- laminated glass is less easy to break than toughened glass
- dummy security cameras do work

## 6. Keys and entry systems

Village halls and the issue of keys always makes a good discussion – is there a record of who holds keys to the property and how do you keep records to ensure they don't fall into the wrong hands?

- Establish a key holder policy and secure methods for passing on keys and the return of keys. **See Appendix A.**
- Ensure that the hire agreement has clear instructions as to how, when and to whom a key should be returned and how the hall should be left with regard to locks and alarms.

Some halls use a swipe card system as the main access system for the hall. These systems have, in some situations, proved very effective. The card unlocks the building, turns the intruder alarm on and off and also the lights if they are left on. The cards are programmed for a whole day or for a period of hire and regular users hold a permanent card. Oake Village Hall in Somerset uses a card entry system that is linked to a computer and the hall knows who has been in the hall and for how long. The case study at **Appendix B** explains how one village hall manages their swipe card system.

## 7. End of session checklist

At the end of all hire periods or meetings of the hall committee the following items need to be checked:

- Look for cigarette ends and other materials that could cause fire
- Check that all valuable items are locked away
- Turn off appliances
- Turn out the lights
- Close all internal doors
- Secure windows and external doors

This checklist applies whether or not another booking will follow.

## 8. Risk assessment

A risk assessment can be undertaken to identify any problem areas and the appropriate action taken to reduce the risks for hall management committees, hall users and to the building. Most village hall management committees will carry out risk assessments as part of their health and safety and fire check routines. Remember to incorporate security of the building into these assessments. **Village Hall Information Sheet 15, Health and safety and legislation in village halls and Village Hall Information Sheet 37, Fire safety in your village hall** provide information about carrying out risk assessments.

Grateful thanks to the Community Council of Somerset, Peter Lawrence of Aon Limited Simon Bland of [www.ruralclick.com](http://www.ruralclick.com) for their input to this information sheet.

## Appendix A

Insert name, address and contact details for village hall:

On behalf of .....I agree:  
(name of organisation hiring the hall)

1. To pay a deposit of £..... for a key to the main door of .....village hall.
2. To keep the key in a safe place and not permit the key to be used to gain unauthorised access at the times booked, failure to do so will result in the withdrawal of the use of the key.
3. That should the key be lost, to make every effort to locate the key, but if unable to do so, to inform the secretary of the hall committee of the loss as soon as possible. I understand a further £..... will be required for a replacement key.
4. At no time should the key be identified by a label or otherwise as being that of .....village hall. The address of the key holder is permissible to assist return should it get lost.
5. To present and re-sign for the issued key at the AGM of the hall in ..... (month) or within two weeks of the date of the AGM, or at the end of the hire period. Failure to do so could result in the withdrawal of the right to a key.
6. To return the key to the secretary/chairman in the event of the above organisation ceasing to hire the hall regularly within one week of termination of hire arrangements, and that any deposit will be returned to the organisation named above.

Signed .....

Date .....

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## Appendix B

### Staplegrave Village Hall, Somerset

Staplegrave village hall in Somerset fitted a single door access control system. This case study explains how they use their system.

“The ‘swipe card system’ is a Norbain system and was installed by Jeffrey Acreman, Electrical Contractors, Taunton.

This system has proved very satisfactory, as well as unlocking the building it turns the intruder alarm on/off and also the ‘normal’ electrical supply. This means that if any lights etc are accidentally left on when the building is vacated they are automatically turned off when the main door is locked with the ‘swipe’ card. The overnight electricity is on a different circuit and is not affected by the ‘swipe card’.

The ‘swipe card’ can be programmed either for the whole day i.e. all day Wednesday, or for a set time of day i.e. 0945-1245hrs on a set day. The only disadvantage with programming the cards is that someone has to go to the hall to carry out the programming at the main box. To overcome having to go to the hall at short notice, the booking secretary keeps a supply of cards programmed for each day which can be loaned out for short one-off bookings and immediately returned to her home after the booking.

The cards are expensive as they have to be bought in bulk so we have overcome this by charging users who hold a permanent card a deposit of £50 per card. So far, no user has lost their card, though one did go through a washing machine but was still usable.

When we first took possession of the building we found that when the card was swiped through the dispenser and the door opened we had no means of locking the door from the inside. This, we felt, was necessary both for personal security and to stop unauthorised people from wandering in off the street and maybe causing damage to the building. The electrical contractor overcame this problem by fitting an internal locking system which would also comply with fire regulations as the main door also acts as the quickest fire escape from the first floor committee room, in the event of fire. The internal locking system works in conjunction with the main security system.

One of the main advantages of the ‘swipe card’ system is that no keys are involved so there is no danger of keys being cut and used by unauthorised people.

We find the system very suitable for our building and easy to use. The cards are easy to handle and they do not have any indication on them as to what they are for but they have a ‘Return to Norbain address if found’ printed on them. We find it useful to issue the cards in a small envelope with ‘return to the booking secretary’s address and telephone number’ written on it. Not only is this useful if lost but the user has the telephone number of the booking secretary handy in case of any difficulty”.