

Security – Religious Buildings

This Loss Prevention Standard provides general security guidance to help reduce the risk of theft and vandalism involving religious buildings.

Security – Religious Buildings

Introduction

Religious buildings encompass a wide variety of premises, differing in their use, architectural style (modern or historic), and location—whether in cities, urban areas, villages, or remote rural settings. These factors, when combined, can create varied and often complex security challenges.



Historic religious buildings often contain valuable fixtures and fittings. This, coupled with a common desire to allow public access and their frequently secluded locations, makes them increasingly attractive to criminals as ‘soft targets’ and therefore vulnerable to crime.

This Loss Prevention Standard outlines practical measures to help reduce the risk of theft and vandalism involving religious buildings.

Understanding the Risks

Religious buildings face unique security challenges. Many are open to the public for extended hours, often located in secluded areas, and may contain valuable artifacts, historic fixtures, and donation funds. These factors, combined with limited security measures in some cases, make them attractive targets for opportunistic criminals and vandals. Risk concerns include:

- **Accessibility.** Open-door policies for worship and visitors create opportunities for unauthorized entry.
- **Valuable Contents.** Historic artifacts, ornate fixtures, and donation boxes can be highly desirable to thieves.
- **Materials.** Heritage properties may incorporate valuable metals such as copper and lead in roof work, downpipes, etc.
- **Secluded Locations.** Rural or isolated sites reduce natural surveillance and increase vulnerability.
- **Security Protections.** Security measures are often light. Heritage door and window fittings are often challenging to secure. Ornate glazing can be easily forced and costly to repair.
- **Predictable Schedules.** Regular service times and events can be exploited by criminals to plan thefts.
- **Vandalism and Malicious Damage.** Religious buildings can be vulnerable to malicious damage and vandalism, including religiously aggravated damage.

Risk Assessment

Before installing or upgrading security protections, a risk assessment should be undertaken. This should include:

- Adequacy of the existing security measures. This includes:
 - **Physical Security.** For example, door and window locks, security shutters, etc.,
 - **Electronic Security.** Such as intruder alarms, video surveillance cameras, etc.
 - **Perimeter Security.** E.g., fencing and gates.
 - **Asset Protection.** Includes security marking, security safes.
 - **Surveillance.** Neighbourhood checks.
 - **Procedural Security.** Policies and procedures, key and code management, training, etc.
- Values and attractiveness of contents and valuable building materials, e.g., lead, copper, etc.
- Costs to repair damage to buildings sustained during a theft incident.
- Business interruption implications.
- Previous theft or vandalism incidents either at the property or in the locality.

This helps ensure that the overall security strategy is sufficient and reflective of the potential loss estimates.

Elimination and Substitution

Where practical, the simplest means of preventing theft can be to remove, reduce or replace any items likely to interest thieves. This can be achieved by:

- Removing valuable items from the property, e.g., to a bank vault.
- Substituting valuable items with copies.
- Regular emptying of donation tins, etc.
- Replacing any lead or copper roofing/fixtures with materials unattractive to thieves, e.g., coated steel sheet, glass-reinforced plastic (GRP), etc.

Note: Your property insurer should be consulted before replacing any metal roofing with felt or other combustible materials. Planning and other permissions may also be required.

Buildings

External Areas

Thieves typically target locations that appear vulnerable, so steps should be taken to make theft more difficult. The most common items stolen are lead or copper roofing materials, along with associated flashing, gutters, and downpipes.

Restrict roof access by installing barbed or razor wire along roof edges or fitting anti-climb spikes to downpipes and similar structures.

Apply non-setting paint, often referred to as ‘anti-vandal’ paint, to downpipes and roofing surfaces to deter climbing and removal.

Important: To reduce the risk of legal liability, these security measures should be installed at a height of at least 2.5 metres and accompanied by clearly visible warning signs.

Refer to the Aviva Loss Prevention Standard **Metal Theft** for further guidance.

Internal Areas

Many religious building doors and window fittings have rudimentary locks or are of vulnerable construction.

- All doors/windows, their associated hardware and frames should be in good condition, of good fit, well-secured to the building structure, inspected and maintained regularly.
- Any degradation, warping or damage should be repaired and any gaps around the frame filled with mortar or an appropriate frame sealant (to conceal the frame fixings).
- Doors should be fitted with good-quality locks, e.g., a BS 3621 certified mortice lock or a high-security closed shackle padlock and pad bar.
- All accessible opening windows should be fitted with key lockable handles or separate good quality window locks. Larger windows, i.e., those with an opening edge greater than 1.2 metres in length, can be improved by fitting a second lock. Windows not required to open should be screwed shut.
- Lightweight windows, especially if fitted with expensive glass, should be protected by external mesh grilles or plastic screens.
- A competent locksmith will be able to provide an opinion as to the quality of locking devices fitted.
- Spare keys should not be left externally e.g., concealed under stones, mats, etc.
- Keys should not be labelled with the property address.
- Where religious buildings are open to the public or there is public access, unlocked combination padlocks or keys to doors/windows should not be left in their locks or otherwise unattended.
 - ✓ Keys or combinations may be stolen and possibly used at a later date to gain entry.
- Keys to any buildings should be removed from persons leaving employment.
 - ✓ Locks or lock cylinders may also need to be changed when keyholders leave employment.
- All buildings should be secured when not in use.

Refer to the Aviva Loss Prevention Standard **Security - Doors, Windows and Other Barriers** for further guidance.

Outbuildings

Outbuildings that contain attractive items, or tools/implements that could aid thieves access main buildings, should be well secured. Considerations include:

Padlocking doors and permanently screwing shut opening windows.

- Fitting bars or steel mesh to protect windows.
- Ride-on mowers should have keys removed and be secured in place by wheel clamps or padlocks and chains.

Electronic Security

Intruder and Holdup Alarm Systems

Intruder and Holdup Alarm Systems (I&HAS) provide enhanced security protection, however, may present challenges given the levels of public access provided and the false alarm potential. They may however be essential when buildings contain high-value and/or theft attractive contents are not in constant use and are often secured.

When considering an intruder and hold up alarm system, use a reputable and competent installer, who are accredited by an independent Certification Body.

The best indicator of competence is to use a company with [National Security Inspectorate \(NSI\)](#) or [Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board \(SSAIB\)](#) approval.

These companies are fully audited against British/European Standards for:

- System design.
- Installation.
- Maintenance.
- Monitoring.
- Staff security vetting, training and record keeping.

Note: NSI or SSAIB accreditation is a prerequisite for a police response.

Discuss any plans to install or extend I&HAS with your insurer or broker.

Refer to the Aviva Loss Prevention Standard **Intruder and Hold-Up Alarms - General Guidance** for further guidance.

Video Surveillance Systems

Detector-activated Video Surveillance Systems (VSS) provide enhanced security of the external and internal areas, particularly where the system is monitored by an accredited Remote Video Response Centre (RVRC).

To ensure the best quality of service, the Installer and RVRC should be members of a UKAS third-party accreditation/approval scheme, such as those provided by the National Security Inspectorate (NSI), or the Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board (SSAIB).

Cybersecurity exposures should be reviewed to ensure appropriate protections and procedures are incorporated including data access approval management.

The presence of wildlife at the site can lead to false activation issues and this should be considered in the system design. Camera equipment that can differentiate between animals and potential intruders should be utilised where possible.

Discuss any plans to install or extend VSS with your insurer or broker.

Refer to the Aviva Loss Prevention Standard **Video Surveillance Systems - Introduction** for further guidance.

Roof Alarm Systems

Given the increased market that exists nowadays, stand-alone roof alarms, often battery-powered, have been developed and are readily available. These systems can be monitored by the Remote Video Response Centre (RVRC).

Asset Protection

Access to valuable items can be mitigated by:

- Mounting pictures, etc., at high level.
- Locking doors to an internal storage room/area.

Note: The latter point should be considered with care, as without an intruder alarm, thieves may cause undetected and extensive damage in forcing internal barriers open.

- Keeping cash, silverware and small valuables in a security safe. A safe should be selected by its recognised 'cash' or 'jewellery rating', as confirmed by your insurers.
 - ✓ Whilst older safes are heavy and appear secure, they can be vulnerable to attack and are often a soft target for thieves armed with appropriate tools and equipment.

Local Surveillance

Where neighbours, congregants, etc., live or work within sight or proximity of the religious buildings, arrange for them to inform you or the Police of unusual activity. Consider:

- Providing them with suitable contact details for security keyholders.
- Informing them of the times when the buildings will be in use or open to visitors and similarly, when contractors are expected to be present.

Note: The value of such a simple measure should not be underestimated. Many thefts, particularly involving lead or copper roofing, have taken place where local people have seen the thieves in action and either assumed they were contractors working at the property, or have been told this by the thieves and accepted it.

- Using timer switches or dusk sensors to turn lights on and off at appropriate times, either all around the premises or in areas of possible concealment, e.g., porches.
- Not letting hedges/shrubs become so large that they block a neighbour's view of the premises and thus conceal thieves.
- Arranging for people to attend/check on the property if it is left open to visitors and also visit regularly to check external and internal areas of the buildings and grounds.

Note: Damp or ingress of water may indicate unseen theft of roofing materials, so should always be promptly investigated.

Recovery

Many stolen items are recovered each year however some cannot be returned to their owners due to lack of ownership proof. Ensure:

- Photographs are taken of valuable items and fittings, with any identifying features being recorded, e.g., makers' names, marks, chips, scratches, repairs, etc.

Note: In the event of loss, such records can also assist in restoration or establishing values.

- Forensic or DNA marking is the application of a discreet agent with a unique forensic signature, to mark valuable and/or easily removable items. Such marking can be applied to artefacts, valuable metals, artwork, sacred vessels, etc. Therefore, any recovered stolen equipment can be returned. Pairing with appropriate warning signage can also act as a valuable deterrent to thieves.
 - ✓ Any such protection should be applied by a competent and experienced company, and preferably members of the British Security Industry Association's (BSIA) Asset and Property Marking Section.

Insurance

Subject to its availability, insurance is one means by which financial recompense for losses may traditionally be provided. In this regard it should be ensured that:

- Any insurance cover and related sums insured are adequate.
 - Note:** Historic items can be difficult to value, so a professional valuation is often advisable.
- All insurer conditions relating to premises security are fully observed.

The existence of insurance is however not a substitute for adequate security and depending on individual circumstances, may either not be available at all or at economic cost, so the following are some measures that can be put in place to protect against theft.

Checklist

A generic **Religious Buildings Security Checklist** is presented in Appendix 1 which can be tailored to your own organisation.

Specialist Partner Solutions

Aviva Risk Management Solutions can offer access to a wide range of risk management products and services at preferential rates via our network of Specialist Partners.

- VSS and detection security: [Secom](#)
- Forensic/DNA marking: [Selectamark](#)

For more information please visit: [Aviva Risk Management Solutions – Specialist Partners](#)

Sources and Useful Links

- [Churchwatch](#)
- [Master Locksmiths Association](#)
- [National Security Inspectorate \(NSI\)](#)
- [Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board \(SSAIB\)](#)
- [The Fire Protection Association and RISC Authority](#)

Note: Whilst UK standards and legislation are referenced in this document, other international standards and legislation should be referenced where applicable.

Additional Information

Relevant Aviva Loss Prevention Standards include:

- **Intruder and Hold Up Alarms - General Guidance**
- **Metal Theft**
- **Security - Doors, Windows and Other Barriers**
- **Security - Glazing**
- **Security - Locks**
- **Video Surveillance Systems - Introduction**

To find out more, please visit [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#) or **speak to one of our advisors.**

Email us at riskadvice@aviva.com or call 0345 366 6666.*

*The cost of calls to 03 prefixed numbers are charged at national call rates (charges may vary dependent on your network provider) and are usually included in inclusive minute plans from landlines and mobiles. For our joint protection telephone calls may be recorded and/or monitored.

Appendix 1 – Religious Buildings Checklist

Location	
Date	
Completed by (name and signature)	

	Title	Y/N	Comments
1.	Have you carried out a security risk assessment?		
2.	Has a professional valuation been carried out, particularly for any historic items?		
3.	Do any buildings include roof areas that are covered with lead or copper sheets?		
4.	Is there a replacement strategy for possibly replacing any lead or copper roofing/fixtures with other materials likely to be less attractive to thieves?		
5.	Are security marking products used which may make items less attractive to thieves or otherwise will aid in their recovery?		
6.	Are warning notices displayed which advertise the security measures in place?		
7.	Have you provided any nearby neighbours with contact details for keyholders?		
8.	Are planned grounds maintenance arrangements in place to ensure that hedges/shrubs do not grow so that they block a neighbours' view and thus conceal thieves?		
9.	Are doors and windows fitted with good quality locks that are secured whenever the premises are unattended?		
10.	Has a I&HAS been installed?		
11.	Has a VSS been installed?		
12.	Is there a security safe within the building for the retention of silverware, small valuables, and cash?		

	Title	Y/N	Comments
13.	Do you have photographic records of valuable items that may assist in their recovery and return if recovered by the police?		
14.	Have you sought independent crime prevention advice from the police and your property insurers before proceeding with any security enhancements?		
15.	Have you sourced security devices and systems from reputable organisations such as those accredited by the schemes mentioned in this document?		
16.	Has security been reviewed after any loss to reduce the risk of a repeat incident?		
17.	Additional comments:		

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