

Health and Safety

The careful management of properties within portfolios is key to providing safe environments for tenants, staff and people in and around dwellings. Premises, equipment and associated systems should be maintained in an efficient working order, with a suitable system of maintenance in place to minimise and avoid future incidents and losses.

The Housing, Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS) covers a wide range of hazards within the sector, to assist with effective management.

Continued claims made by residents who have fallen on loose or uneven paving, or in poorly lit stairways, highlight the need for robust management. Relatively simple solutions can significantly reduce exposure to incidents and subsequent claims. Tenant newsletters are an excellent means of conveying key health and safety advice, and can act as a further reminder to residents on how to report issues, potentially avoiding future incidents.

Key considerations in respect of general health and safety include:

- **Slips, trips and falls** by those using the premises, both internally and externally. Particular attention must be given to ensure regular inspections are carried out of all communal areas, such as floor surfaces, stairways and

changes in level. And external areas, including footpaths, parking areas, garage areas, compounds, recreation areas and gardens. Issues such as loose pavings, pot holes, missing surface water gratings, manhole covers and sunken ground levels are just some examples of key hazards that – if not tightly managed – will present significant risks to residents, visitors and members of the general public

- **Protection around changes in level**, e.g. external access ramps, steps or walkways – together with handrails, balustrading and guarding for stairways and balconies – should also be the subject of rigorous checks and assessments. Appropriate lighting should be provided to highlight changes in level, including suitably located and maintained lighting within stairway enclosures and communal areas.

Similar issues exist with regard to preventing falls from opening windows within residential units, and appropriate risk-based assessments should be undertaken as necessary. The use of appropriately specified and installed window restrictions is also key to ensuring a safe environment for residents, and a strong policy for their provision and installation should be in place.



For example, somewhere that remedial measures may be required is in older residential conversions – where sliding sash type windows may have low sill levels and therefore require an alternative fixed lower light type window; or internal guarding to prevent occupants from falling.

- **Drainage, sanitation and water supplies** must be fit for purpose, with appropriate identification, checks, maintenance and necessary improvement works. Identification of the likely age and an assessment of the condition of such services are vital for managing the hazards and risks.
- **Dampness and mould growth** pose health risks to residents unless identified and rectified swiftly. Ventilation systems, opening windows and suitable background ventilation are key to providing a healthy environment. Hazards to be aware of include water and damp ingress from blocked rainwater pipes and bridged damp-proof courses. The provision of appropriate lifestyle advice to tenants via newsletters can include guidance on how to identify problems, and measures to take. Such advice is likely to provide the most effective means of reducing the potential for dampness and mould growth in dwellings. And can also act as a reminder of how to report maintenance issues.
- **Heating** systems vary greatly across this sector, depending on property type, age, location, construction, fuel sources and on the particular policies adopted centrally or locally. Appropriate heating provision should be reviewed with consideration given to the risk profile of the tenant group, etc. Appropriate maintenance, servicing, ventilation, guarding and flues are essential to eliminate risks associated with fuel combustion. Carbon monoxide presents an increasing risk, and appropriate measures to manage this effectively is essential. A clear policy on the means of identifying and installing appropriate detection devices is key to this.
- **Collision and entrapment** – for example catching limbs in doors or shutters, or colliding with doors and outward-opening low-level windows – require identification and suitable assessment.
- **Fire and explosion** risks require careful management after appropriate risk profiling to identify properties and tenants at risk and the consideration of ignition sources and service installation types. Lifestyle issues – which could range from vulnerable groups to tenants whose homes contain higher than average levels of

combustible contents – should also be considered. It may be necessary to review the provision of gas-fired services where they currently exist and replace them with electric alternatives.

- **Waste and refuse** within the proximity of residential units requires close supervision and consideration of current arrangements. Is waste allowed to accumulate in escape routes? Is the immediate vicinity of the dwellings attracting vermin and associated disease risks? Policies may need to be site-specific as opposed to generic, portfolio-wide arrangements. Guidance on how to remove waste – e.g. by refuse chute for the majority of items but by alternative arrangements for larger items – may be required. Consider the ability of tenants to move waste to external storage areas, and identify alternative arrangements where this is not possible. Tenant newsletters could incorporate brief guidance on the risks associated with refuse in escape routes, and give information on waste disposal and recycling facilities.
- **Lighting** provision is a key factor in ensuring a safe environment for tenants within individual dwellings, communal areas, circulation routes and external areas. This is essential for safety not only for security purposes, but also from a trip-and-falling perspective. Particularly where changes in level or other hazards exist.
- **Maintenance** measures, such as repairing defective door closers and freeing jammed or poorly fitting windows, are also issues that, if not robustly managed, pose potential risks to users of the buildings. Maintenance programmes – decorating, for example – must take into account a health and safety threat. For example, a window being painted shut – despite needing to be opened for ventilation purposes or as a possible means of escape in an emergency.
- **Asbestos** within all housing units should be identified and assessed. A formal and documented asbestos register should be completed and communicated to all contractors and repair & maintenance staff, and kept up to date – following any damage, removal or treatment works. Areas where asbestos may be present, or where residents could be at risk, may need to be sealed off. Specialist advice should always be sought and adhered to as necessary.

It should be noted that the above list is not exhaustive, and both statutory legislation and requirements must be met and adhered to where applicable.

For more information please contact us at social.housing@zurichmunicipal.com