



# Keeping People Safe

CHURCH HEALTH & SAFETY TOOLKIT

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## NIGHT SHELTERS



Homelessness can affect people from all walks of life, of any gender, age or belief, and winter can be a particularly tough time for homeless members of the community. Churches have a long tradition of helping those in need, and so it is no surprise that many churches open their doors to provide shelter to homeless people every winter.

Every shelter project is unique and there are many different variations of them. Most run during the winter months, anytime from November to the end of March. Many will open for a set period during this time, whilst others operate for the full five months. Some churches run night shelters as part of a wider, cold weather scheme with other churches and charitable organisations in their area. Here, they work together on a rota basis to provide a warm and safe bed for the night.

In many shelters, churches offer more than this providing a range of other support services. These often include providing a hot evening meal and breakfast, or advice on housing support, debt counselling, domestic violence and getting a job. Some also offer washing facilities, whilst others simply offer a warm place to sit and chat. Whatever the shelter project, it is essential that steps are taken to make sure they remain safe places for both those in need and those who run them.

## Legal requirements

Your duties under health and safety law will depend on your circumstances. Generally, you will need to ensure that your night shelter is properly managed so that people remain safe. For example, if someone is injured you may need to show that you have met your duty of care.

If you are an employer, you will have duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the regulations made under it.

You may need to:

- Complete risk assessments to identify the precautions you need to take
- Implement those precautions, providing information and training for any employees and volunteers on what they need to do
- Document your arrangements and responsibilities for running the shelter, perhaps as part of your health and safety policy
- Keep records of what you have done.

Even if you are not an employer, but control non-domestic premises, you may still have a duty to make sure the premises are safe. Further information is available at [www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety](http://www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety). If you are providing food, you may have to comply with requirements to make sure this is done safely and hygienically.

Your shelter may need planning permission from your local authority. You should speak with them before setting things up to see what you need to do. It's also important to check your insurance policy, as you may not be automatically covered for such an activity. Another consideration might relate to the receipt of charitable funds. Many groups run under the charitable status of the church and it's PCC, however some may want to apply for this in their own right. If you chose to do this you would need to arrange insurance independently of the church.



### Hazards to look out for

Some of the typical hazards include:

- Furniture and stored supplies or equipment creating obstructions that could cause trips
- Poor weather conditions (e.g. snow, ice and rain) making pathways and car parks slippery
- Inadequate lighting making pathways difficult to navigate, particularly on dark winter nights
- Heavy or bulky items (such as beds and mattresses) that staff or volunteers may have to move to help set up and break down the night shelter
- Some homeless people may turn to drink or drugs to help them cope with their difficult circumstances, leading to aggressive or challenging behaviour or vandalism
- Illness and infection as a consequence of poor food hygiene practices, contact with soiled bedding, or inadvertently handling sharps
- Vulnerable adults suffering with mental health issues, which may be manifested by physical distress, self-harm, abusive or inappropriate behaviour towards others\*.

\*Note: this list is not exhaustive

### Precautions you can take

Some of the typical precautions include:

- Planning carefully where items will be placed both when in use, and during storage, so walkways are kept clear and free from obstructions
- Making sure outdoor pathways, other access routes and car parks are safe and well-lit
- Gritting walkways and car parks if freezing temperatures are forecast
- Clearing snow properly
- If part of an organised night shelter scheme, asking organising agencies for relevant information about the people they are referring before opening each night
- Ensuring that at least two people are working, and that you have staff who stay awake through the night.
- Making sure lone working is avoided where possible, particularly if staff may be left alone with a guest
- Asking guests to sign an agreement in advance, agreeing to the 'house' rules relating to drugs, alcohol, weapons, smoking, conduct etc.
- Making sure food is prepared safely and hygienically
- Providing suitable personal protective equipment (such as gloves, coveralls etc.) for staff where appropriate.\*

\*Note: this list is not exhaustive

## Making a start

### Action

1. Identify the needs you want to address in providing your night shelter service and how these will be met.

Decide how you will meet any related legal and governance requirements.

2. Check the precautions you have in place are adequate.

If they are not, identify any additional ones that are needed and who will be responsible for taking them.

Ensure that the precautions you have identified are taken and remain effective.

### Guidance

If you are considering opening a night shelter, you will probably be aware of a need for one in your local area. Speaking to existing service providers and finding ways to compliment and support their work can be an effective way of responding to needs without undermining or duplicating existing provision.

It may be a good idea to speak to other local churches who are providing a similar service to see how they have gone about it. You may also want to talk to your local authority to identify what they may require of you. Other agencies, such as Housing Justice or Homeless Link can provide further help and provides examples of best practice. Information is available at [www.housingjustice.org.uk](http://www.housingjustice.org.uk) and [www.homeless.org.uk/regions](http://www.homeless.org.uk/regions).

If you have any concerns about setting up your own night shelter, an alternative might be to speak to other providers about how you can support them within an existing service.

Working in partnership could reduce the time you have to spend on organisational administration, which start-up services often underestimate.

If you are an employer, you will need to complete a risk assessment covering the aspects of running your night shelter. This should help you identify what precautions are required.

Aside from this, it is sensible to plan activities anyway so that your shelter runs smoothly and remains safe for all.

The precautions required will depend on the nature of the services you are offering, your location and the profile of guests likely to be using your shelter.

Examples of the things you may need to consider include:

- The suitability and layout of the accommodation
- Winter weather precautions to prevent slips and trips (e.g. repairing any defects to access paths, making sure outdoor lighting is sufficient and in good working order, and making sure a ready supply of grit is available if required)

*Continued overleaf*

## Making a start

### Action

3. Consider using a logbook for guests.

### Guidance

- The equipment required for washing, the preparation of food, cleaning the venue etc. and how this will be used, moved, stored and maintained
- The adequacy of fire precautions, including fire exits, evacuation procedure etc., updating your fire risk assessment if you have one
- Emergency arrangements, including any first aid kit, telephone and list of emergency numbers (including those of the project leader/coordinator, local doctor, police, all-night chemist, local priest or minister. It is good practice to notify them that you are running the night shelter
- The correct number of staff or volunteers required to run the shelter safely and any special skills or training that they may need
- Any support or input needed from other service providers or agencies
- Any 'hand over' procedures necessary at the end of a shift
- Preventing unauthorised access to areas not intended for use
- Secure areas for guests to leave any valuables etc.
- Gather information about guests in advance in order to better understand their needs and any vulnerabilities.

In some situations, you may need to make a note of any checks or inspections you make to ensure these precautions are being taken and equipment remains safe. You should correct any defects identified in good time.

This will normally contain details of who did and did not arrive; any accidents that occurred etc.

This project lead/coordinator should be responsible for making sure that it is available at each church on the day the shelter is running. It should be updated by the church coordinator or shift leader with information that would be useful to the next shift, the church running the shelter on the following night or the other volunteers.

## Making a start

### Action

4. Consider using an agreement ('house-rules') for guests.

5. Ensure that employees and volunteers know what precautions to take.

Make a note of any information or training that is provided to individuals in these situations.

### Guidance

It is a good idea to have an agreement that is signed by guests before using your facility. These rules should be kept as simple as possible.

Guests should be aware of what they can expect from the shelter, as well as what they will not get from it. This will make sure that there is no confusion over what is expected. The agreement may state that:

- The drinking of alcohol or use of drugs (except prescription drugs) is not permitted
- Violent, threatening, racist or other antisocial behaviour or language will not be tolerated
- Offensive weapons are not to be carried on the premises
- Smoking is not permitted in the church buildings
- Pets (except guide/hearing dogs) are not permitted
- Entry to the premises will not be permitted after a specified time

Some guests may not have English as their first language, so provision will be needed for them so that they understand the rules too.

The level of information and training required will vary depending on the nature of the work and your particular circumstances. In all cases it is likely that you will need to consider providing this in relation to:

- Any required emergency procedures
- Mental health awareness
- Drug and alcohol awareness
- Precautions to ensure personal safety.

Your staff and helpers do not necessarily need to be experts, but providing them with a better understanding of the context in which they are working and the issues relevant to homelessness will help them work more safely and effectively.

## Making a start

### Action

**6.** Document your arrangements and responsibilities for running a night shelter.

Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid.

### Guidance

If you have prepared a health and safety policy, record your arrangements as part of it. You can use our Church Health and Safety Policy template if you haven't done this and need one to comply with health and safety law.

**Download: Church Health and Safety Policy, Template**

## Want to know more?

Other useful health and safety information is available at  
[www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety](http://www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety)

Further guidance and resources are also available at  
[www.housingjustice.org](http://www.housingjustice.org)

Note: if you are in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey or the Isle of Man, then regional variations might apply. In this instance, you should check the guidance provided by the Enforcing Agency for your region. This will be freely available on their website.

## Need to contact us?

If you would like to speak to someone about health and safety in churches, you can either:

**Call our Risk Management Advice Line on 0345 600 7531**  
(Monday to Friday, 09.00 to 17.00 - excluding Bank Holidays)

**Or email us at [risk.advice@ecclesiastical.com](mailto:risk.advice@ecclesiastical.com)**

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