



They've asked me to be a

Health

Safety

Coordinator

They've asked me to be a **Health & Safety coordinator**

Introduction

What do Health & Safety coordinators do?

Although multi-faceted and often complex in execution, H&S coordinators only have one responsibility – to do all they can to ensure that everyone who uses the church and any associated buildings (like a Church Hall) doesn't come to any harm while on church premises. This obviously includes making sure that buildings are properly maintained and safe to be used as a place of worship and for other activities.

The skills and attributes of Health & Safety coordinators

- Someone who cares about the church building and all the people who use it
- Someone who pays great attention to detail and has good observational skills
- Someone who is organised and efficient
- Someone who has an enquiring and lively mind
- Someone who doesn't shy away from reading and writing reports
- Someone with access to, and competence in, using the internet
- If the church building is old and/or listed an interest in heritage buildings would certainly be useful.

Overview of essential tasks

Although most churches are small and comparatively low-risk environments they're still obliged to abide by many of the same health and safety laws as much larger organisations. In fact, if this booklet detailed all the health and safety laws that impact churches it would be a weighty tome, totally putting to those wondering if this voluntary role is for them! This booklet focuses on key legislation and requirements and signposts to other areas.

The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 provides the legislative framework for UK workplaces and so places a duty on all places of worship, to ensure – as far as is reasonably practicable – the health, safety and welfare of all who make use of the buildings for whatever reason. A duty is also placed on all employees, volunteers, contractors and visitors to follow the guidelines.

Do not assume that your church is exempt from the Act's requirements because it has no direct employees. Although many churches have fewer

than five employees it must be noted that all volunteers count as employees, as do part-time workers, such as organists, cleaners and caretakers.

In addition to the above, the Act also requires churches to have a Health & Safety policy, a Risk Assessment document and a way to provide health and safety information to employees and those using the building.

Your church's Health & Safety policy

Section 2(3) of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 requires all churches, however large or small, to have a Health & Safety Policy. We recommend that all health and safety coordinators begin their time in post by creating or updating their church's policy.

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) recommends taking a three-section approach when creating a health and safety policy:

- a statement of general policy on health and safety at work which sets out your church's commitment to managing health and safety effectively. This section also covers what you want to achieve
- the responsibility section sets out who is responsible for specific actions – who does what, when and how
- the arrangements section contains detail on what you are going to do to achieve the aims set out in your statement of general policy on health and safety.

If you have five or more employees, you must write your policy down – although we would recommend that all churches write down their policy – it will make church health and safety matters both clearer and easier to manage.

The HSE website has [excellent information on writing your policy](#) including an [example policy](#) and a [template](#) for creating your own policy. For more specific church-based resources we recommend the [Church Health & Safety toolkit](#) on the Ecclesiastical Insurance company website.

Once your policy is drafted it should be discussed at the Elders' Meeting – and formally approved by the Elders before it's issued for use.

Testing requirements

These testing timelines should be noted – they represent best practice and we strongly recommend they're included in your risk assessment document.

Item	Servicing frequency
Alarm Systems	Every year
Boiler and heating system	Every year
Electrical Installations	Every five years*
Portable Appliance Testing (PAT)	Every year **
Fire Extinguishers	Every year
Lifts and stair lifts	Every six months***
Lightning Conductor	Every four years

* by an electrician accredited to work on commercial installations

** by an electrician. Check the D13 (r)-on commere

Employers' Liability Insurance.

Check whether the church needs/has Employers' Liability Insurance – if the church employs anyone (again noting that volunteers count as employees as do part-time workers such as organists and cleaners) then Employers' Liability Insurance is required, and the certificate must be displayed where all employees/volunteers can see it. The law allows it to be displayed electronically but given that churches would need their employees to know how and where to find the certificate, and have reasonable access to it, it's probably simpler to display the paper certificate.

Provision of toilet and washing facilities.

Although it is recommended that churches provide these facilities where they can, it is not a legal requirement to do so. (A 2010 survey by the National Churches Trust estimated that almost a third of the UK's church buildings do not have toilet facilities – with listed buildings being the least well equipped.) However, if you can provide them, do. And if, you do, ensure that these are provided and are maintained in good working order. Please note that any new toilet facilities should be accessible by people with disabilities.



Reporting to the Elders' Meeting.

The H&S coordinator must keep the Elders' Meetings up to date with all H&S concerns and issues providing regular written or verbal reports to the meetings as required.

Providing Health & Safety information to those using the building.

This can be as simple as providing information on a noticeboard or in a short presentation at Church Meeting. Any necessary training could be offered in the same way, and run at a time that suits everyone.

Specific health and safety issues

Once you've created your policy and risk assessment documents it's time to move on to consider other areas which need attention. Some of these areas highlighted below may have formed part of your policy and risk assessment research and, although it's possible you have already done all that you need to in these areas, they're worth revisiting to ensure that the church has met its legal obligations in the key areas of fire safety, asbestos, food safety, first aid, accident reporting and building work.

First Aid

The Health & Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981 require all employers – and this includes churches – to provide 'adequate and appropriate' equipment, facilities and people to enable first aid to be given.

As a minimum, churches must identify one or more people to take care of first aid arrangements, provide a suitably stocked first aid box and clearly display

The main duty of the 'appointed person/people' is to take charge if anyone suffers illness or injury on church premises – including calling an ambulance if necessary.

It is not a legal requirement for churches to have trained first aiders; although larger churches or those running large events or certain activities may decide they need one. If you feel your church would benefit from having a trained first

If all of the food your church provides is covered by,

nuts; peanuts; sesame seeds; soybeans and sulphur dioxide and sulphites (if they are at a concentration of more than ten parts per million). If you are registered as a food business (see below) then you are legally required to list the allergens on any food served. More information on allergens can be found [here](#).

Registering as a food business

If your church runs a café, a soup kitchen, or something similar from its premises – any venture which involves providing food to members of the public (whether or not those consuming it are paying for it) then you must register as a food business with your local authority. The process is not onerous, but it is essential. In the first instance call the environmental health office at your local authority to register at least 28 days before opening. The environmental health team will be able to provide you with all the information you need – but be prepared to follow strict food hygiene procedures and to have ad hoc inspections. If you are running a food business from the church then at least one member of the staffing team will be expected to obtain the Level 2 food hygiene certificate.

A word about café boilers

Building work

If your church undertakes a building

Background

Some church premises may contain asbestos or asbestos containing materials (ACMs), particularly those what were built or have been modernised, refurbished or extended during the 20th century. In 2000 it became illegal to use asbestos in buildings, although caution is still advised if a new church was built on an existing basement or linked to other, older, buildings. Asbestos presents a problem when exposed, so the risk is greatest when it is disturbed, damaged or is just in a poor condition – therefore those at greatest risk of exposure are those carrying out repairs and maintenance work. In churches asbestos is most often found in heating systems, pipe organs, organ blower boxes, tiles and roofing materials.

Legal requirements

Those responsible for the maintenance or repair of churches have a legal duty to manage the risk of asbestos in their buildings – and their obligations are set out in the [Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012](#). To meet the duty, churches must take reasonable steps to find out if asbestos is present; assess the risk of anyone being exposed to it; keep a record of all findings and prepare a plan that details how the risk will be managed. More extensive plans are needed for churches who are planning to work on or around areas that are known to contain ACMs. More information on this is available [here](#).

We recommend that you first identify what, if any, information already exists about any ACMs in your building – check to see if the church has already had an asbestos survey and look through any reports from surveyors or architects. If no information can be found, or if that which is available is insufficient, then the church should identify if any ACMs may be present, record what is found and develop a plan to show how the risk will be managed and by whom. There is no need to detail that process here – detailed guidance can be found in [Ecclesiastical's Church Asbestos Guide](#) – we strongly recommend reading this excellent document which details every part of the process.

The Health & Safety implications of Covid-19

This booklet was written during the pandemic when all parts of the UK were subject to strict rules and regulations relating to Covid-19. It's essential that your church is fully compliant and covid-secure so do prioritise keeping up-to-date by regularly visiting [the coronavirus pages of the URC website](#).

It's also worth highlighting the risk of Legionnaires disease in the water supplies of buildings that are being used infrequently – as is the case for most church buildings during the pandemic. The HSE website has detailed information on [Legionnaires Disease](#) but, to help reduce the risk of legionnaires, flush out infrequently used outlets (including showerheads and taps) at least weekly – running all hot and cold taps and any showers for between two and five minutes each. The outside of all taps and shower heads should be cleaned at least once every three months too.

Further information

The HSE website is extensive and, arguably, the best starting point for any health and safety related query.

For church-specific information there's Congregational Insurance's [Safer Places of Worship](#) website and the [health and safety section](#) of Ecclesiastical Insurance company website.

The Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers (ACAT), of which all URC Treasurers are members, has chapters on Health & Safety and Risk Assessment in its handbook together with an example policy and checklists.

The last word

This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/ask

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