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Pandemic Response and the Temporary Closing of Facilities

The rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic has prompted governments and businesses to take extraordinary steps to help slow the spread of the virus and keep people safe. As a result, many organisations are being forced to close their facilities temporarily.

Initially it is noted that insurers must be informed of any material change in the circumstances of an insured building or facility, as if not done, insurance cover could be invalidated. Therefore, if a facility is to be closed it is vital that the insurer or broker be notified as soon as the site is shut.

Below are some recommended steps, considerations, and tips to help keep your facilities safe and secure during their temporary closure. Note that this is an inclusive but not exhaustive list of recommendations.

General Property Conservation

- Prepare for a potential delay from all emergency response services (i.e., police, fire, and ambulance). Due to the current situation, emergency response services will have to prioritise their responses, which could mean fire alarm activations, property damage/vandalism, and non-violent crimes calls will not be considered a priority and response will be delayed.

- Ensure emergency response plans are up-to-date.

- Review and update contact information/phone lists.

- Make certain emergency contact information at each location is visibly posted for emergency response services.

- Ensure fire department information packs are in place and have the most up-to-date facility information, keys, and access control credentials.

- Contact the local authority, fire department, or police service to let them know that the building will be unoccupied until a specific date. Remember to update them if this date changes.

- Ensure security and fire alarm systems are functioning properly and connected to **TWO** independent communications mediums (i.e., radio, cellular, digital communicator) that can alert your third party monitoring agency.

- Make sure all building exits are operating normally. Note that according to code, you cannot modify building exits even if the building is evacuated. For example, exterior doors cannot be chained.

- Test your emergency communications systems (i.e. SMS text, RSS feeds, auto-dialling, email). This includes asking employees to confirm receipt of test messages.

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- Ensure your technology resilience and disaster recovery plans are up-to-date and stress-tested so that employees can continue to be productive remotely. If you have on-premise hosting, frequently monitor your cooling systems to ensure increased system demands from remote employees are not creating an ignition hazard. Portable air-conditioning units and commercial grade fans should be on hand to provide additional aisle and room cooling if needed.

- Reinforce your cybersecurity protocols with employees and ask them to remain hyper-vigilant to ransomware and phishing scams. Cyber criminals will use the current pandemic to prey on organisations and their remote staff. The National Cyber Security Centre has also developed a cybersecurity resource centre where you can access more information.

- Ensure all drainage systems are fully functional, and drain outlets are clear of obstructions. This includes systems in lift pits, basements, and other low-level areas.

- Work with your custodial service provider to disinfect and clean buildings according to recommendations from Public Health England. Current guidance can be found on the Public Health England website.

- Ensure all shipping and receiving operations are suspended or make alternative arrangements for delivery services.

- Ensure all rodent and pest control measures are current and in place.

- Ensure the building management system (BMS) system is fully functional from a remote location. This includes the ability to log in, monitor, and control the facility.

- Ensure facilities personnel have laptops that can go home with them to monitor the BMS.

Site Security

- Use barriers, surveillance, and lighting to deter, detect, and delay illegal access into a facility. Criminals will take advantage of the current situation to prey on properties with high-value assets and that appear vacant and insecure.

- Site intruder alarms and video surveillance systems should be operational and able to transmit to your third-party monitoring agency.

- The electronic access control system should be modified so that only essential facility personnel have access to the facility. All door and gate auto unlocking/opening programmes should be disabled.

- All other non-essential employee cards/fobs should be "locked out" until the facility is reopened. If keys are used to secure the site, ensure all keys are accounted for.

- Perimeter fences should be in good condition. This includes fence mesh, barbed wire topper, and no gaps at ground level.

- All perimeter doors and windows should be closed and locked.

- Pedestrian and vehicle access gates should be closed and locked.

- Contact information for the Security Centre or on-call staff should be posted on all gates in case first responders need emergency access.

- All perimeter cameras should be fully functional and remotely viewable via laptop or mobile device. If fixed surveillance equipment is not installed, install an off-the-shelf, battery powered, Wi-Fi capable system temporarily. Also, make sure any intruder alarm alerts available with your video surveillance system are turned on.

- All interior and exterior night lighting should continue to be used and maintained. Light is a deterrent for criminals and helps police survey your facility.

- Regular checks should be carried out of the perimeter of the the facility to check for graffiti. If any is identified, arrange to have it removed or painted over. If a facility appears run-down or clearly unoccupied it becomes a more attractive target for arson and vandalism.

- Maintain reasonable security guard staffing levels during all shifts to ensure facility security. Consider staggering staff in the event staff become infected or need to care for family members. Reassigning non-essential fixed posts personnel (lobby security) to other essential security posts. If a security guard force is not in place, consider contracting a security company to patrol the facility temporarily.

- Provide security guards with the necessary protective equipment and train them on how to use it. Protective equipment may include facemasks, latex-free gloves, and appropriate cleaning/disinfection supplies.

- Provide security the most up-to-date contact information for facility management, information technology contacts, and management contacts.

- Ensure any combustible materials such as waste packaging have been removed from the site to minimise the temptation to potential arsonists.

Equipment and Utilities

- Ensure all vital facility fuel tanks are topped off such as diesel fire pumps. Non vital fuel tanks should be drained down and fuel be safely disposed of or stored elsewhere.

- Ensure all non-critical equipment such as process machinery are turned off and in a safe state to leave unattended for a significant length of time.

- If possible to isolate non-essential electrical and water supplies without impairing vital systems, this should be done.

- Any equipment or processes that utilise flammable, combustible, or hazardous liquids should be safely drained down and liquids be stored appropriately elsewhere.

- Any other non-essential services to site such as natural gas should, if safe (and not required for maintaining building temperature above 4°C), be isolated.

- Maintain heat at a minimum of 4°C within all facilities that use water-based fixed fire suppression and domestic water systems.

- Complete a register of all drained and isolated systems so as to minimise disruption when reinstating systems.

Fire Prevention and Response

- Ensure fire suppression and alarm/detection systems are operational and able to transmit to your third party monitoring agency. Also, check that all fire pumps are in "auto" mode, and run timers are disabled.

- Ensure the continued effective function of the fire protection/detection systems by making provisions for continuation of programmes of inspection, testing, and maintenance during the period of closure. This includes weekly tests for sprinkler systems if applicable.

- Perform no "hot" work in the facility unless it is vital to emergency repairs. If hot work has to take place, ensure appropriate hot work permitting procedures are in place and followed.

- Ensure fire extinguishers are functional and posted evacuation plans are up-to-date for essential personnel required to operate on-site.

- Ensure all fire doors across the facility are shut. Carry out a check with a register of fire doors to ensure this has been effectively carried out.

If you have any questions or need additional guidance, please reach out to your Marsh Risk Consulting property risk consultant, or contact a colleague below. You can also visit Marsh's COVID-19 resource hub for additional information.

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