



The
United
Reformed
Church



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

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Introduction

This booklet has been primarily written for those who are considering taking up the role of Health & Safety coordinator (H&S coordinator hereafter) in their local United Reformed church. Health & Safety covers a huge range of subjects and situations and, while this booklet does not claim to be all-embracing, it does cover the desirable skills and attributes of H&S coordinators; the key legislation and associated essential tasks as well as specific information on first aid, reporting of accidents and incidents, fire safety, food safety, asbestos, building work and Covid-19.

This information reflects the legal position in England and Wales. While the position in Scotland is broadly similar – for example the 1974 Health & Safety at Work Act is the principal piece of legislation for employers in Scotland as it is in England and Wales – we'd recommend referring to the [HSE in Scotland](#) and/or www.gov.scot information for specifics.

Why do churches need a Health & Safety coordinator?

The Elders of every local church have a duty of care to keep safe everyone who uses the church building – whatever the activity is, and whenever it takes place. The legal requirements are rigorous and cover a wide area – from food to fire safety; electrical inspections to the correct use of ladders – so, it makes sense for all churches to have someone in post who is able to focus on health and safety responsibilities to make sure the church is meeting its legal obligations.



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 off-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.

Reviewing your policy: The HSE recommend reviewing your health and safety policy at least annually. It's worth noting that changes to health and safety law normally come into effect in April and October, so do check the HSE website in March and September to see if any of the changes are relevant to your church – and if they are, do update your policy.



Your church's Health & Safety risk assessment

The church risk assessment is also a crucial document – and it makes sense to work on the church risk assessment document at the same time as you're developing the church's health and safety policy.

Whether you're creating a risk assessment from scratch or updating an existing document we recommend you start by taking a walk round every part of the church including any associated buildings and outside space. Look out for those things that might cause harm to people and think about the precautions that could be taken to minimise any risks. Your tour of the church's property should include noticing any potential dangers related to slips and trips, any fire risks, as well as risks that are more 'hidden' such as fixed machinery (e.g., organ blower motors) and portable electrical equipment such as kettles. Write up what you have observed in a simple format include the precautions that need to be taken and a note to say when they were last taken/checked. This document is your risk assessment and should be shared with the Elders' Meeting.



The HSE website has a useful [section on risk assessments](#) including templates and examples which you may find helpful. Don't be tempted to copy and paste another church's risk assessment, it wouldn't satisfy the legal requirements – you need to demonstrate that you've thought about the specific risks of your church environment.

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 HSE website for full information on [PAT testing](#)

*** [LOLER regulation 9\(3\)](#) requires all lifts used at work to be thoroughly examined by a competent person at least every 6 months if used to carry people



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 notices so that those attending church-run events (including worship) know where the first aid box is and who the appointed person/people are.

The first aid box should contain the following items: a leaflet giving general advice in first aid, **such as this one from the HSE** which is available to purchase and also as a free download; individually wrapped sterile plasters; sterile eye pads; individually-wrapped sterile triangular bandages; medium and large individually-wrapped un-medicated dressings for wounds; safety pins and disposable gloves. Please note that medicines and tablets – even over-the-counter painkillers like paracetamol – should not be kept in the first aid box.



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 aider, do make sure the training undertaken is sufficient. (Of course, you may already have trained first aiders or qualified medical professionals in your congregation who would be willing to take on the role.)

The HSE offers guidance on selecting a first aid training provider [here](#). To keep up basic skills, HSE recommends that all First Aiders attend annual refresher training.

Recording accidents

Although the law only requires workplaces to keep an accident book if they have more than ten employees (remember that, for churches, that includes volunteers) we would recommend all churches keep such a book and log all accidents and injuries to employees, volunteers or the public no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. (Completed forms containing personal information should be removed from the accident book and stored in a secure location to comply with data requirements.)

Accident books are widely available online and from good bookshops

A simple note of any first aid treatment given should also be recorded – and it's good practice to record non-injury incidents ('near misses') too. These are incidents that could have led to an injury, but didn't. (For example, a young adult tripping on a loose tile and managing to break their fall, as opposed to an elderly person falling and breaking a bone.) Information on all accidents and near misses will help identify any patterns of accidents and will be very useful when reviewing your risk assessments. And, of course, if your church needed to submit an insurance claim following an accident on church premises, it is almost certain that your insurers would want to see your reporting records.

Reporting accidents and incidents

In the event of a serious accident or incident, you may need to report it to the Enforcing Authority and keep certain records. Not all accidents need to be reported, but those that do include death, specified injuries, gas incidents and dangerous occurrences. Further guidance on what you need to do in these circumstances is available [here](#). Although you may feel it extremely unlikely that your church could be involved in such a serious incident it is good practice to know how to deal with it. This brief guide from the HSE on [Reporting accidents and incidents at work](#) provides an excellent overview.

Fire Safety

Churches, as non-domestic premises, have to abide by fire safety legislation. For churches with a capacity of fewer than 300 people the key legislation is The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. This Order requires churches to:

- eliminate the risk of fire – or reduce it as far as is reasonably practical
- provide general fire precautions to deal with any assessed risk
- take additional measures to ensure fire safety where flammable and/or explosive materials are used or stored
- create a plan to deal with emergencies and;
- where necessary, record any findings.

Online resources, giving more detail of your obligations and how to fulfil them, are widely available; two excellent place to start are the [Fire safety risk assessment checklist](#) from the gov.uk website and this [church-specific fire risk information](#) from Congregational Insurance's Safer Places of Worship website. If, after having read all the online information, you need advice specific to your church, you could contact your local fire station – they are often able to come out to visit your premises and advise you of your legal obligations. If your church premises hold more than 300 people then this information on [fire safety risk for large places of assembly](#) is essential reading.

Food safety

Serving food at church

Sharing food together – whether its tea and cake after a service, a fundraising coffee morning, the village fete, or a celebration meal – has always been part of Church life. But, even in these informal settings any food provided – whether or not it is sold – must be safe to eat and comply with food legislation.

If all of the food your church provides is covered by, or similar to, the examples listed in the paragraph above, then it's unlikely that you will need to do anything more than be certain that those involved in the preparation and serving of food follow the basic food safety and hygiene practices listed below:

- wash your hands regularly with soap and hot water
- ensure that food preparation areas are properly cleaned and sanitised after use and wash any equipment you are using in hot soapy water
- prepare food in advance and freeze it, if you can, but ensure the food is properly defrosted before you use it
- always wash fresh fruit and vegetables
- keep raw and ready-to-eat foods apart
- do not use food past its use-by date
- always read any cooking instructions and make sure food is properly cooked before you serve it
- keep food out of the fridge for the shortest time possible.



It might be worthwhile to remind all those involved in food preparation and serving of these basic rules – perhaps putting them on the kitchen notice board and asking those involved in preparing and serving food to read them. We would also recommend that you read this information from the Food Standards Agency on [serving food at community events](#).

If you need more help, or have any questions contact your local food safety team. You can find out how to contact your local team [here](#).

Allergen labelling

Another area to note is that of allergen labelling. If your church serves food but is not registered as a food business it is not legally obliged to list the main 14 allergens in any food served but it is good practice and we would strongly recommend that you do so. The 14 allergens are: celery; cereals containing gluten; crustaceans – such as prawns, crabs and lobsters; eggs; fish; lupin; milk; molluscs – such as mussels and oysters; mustard; tree nuts – including almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia

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

Most churches use a 'café boiler' in their kitchens and almost certainly use them without even thinking about the risks. We're highlighting the issue in this booklet because café boilers can be so easily overlooked.

In essence, whatever the type of boiler your church has it will produce steam (or hot water at a temperature greater than 100°C) which, if it failed when in use, would cause serious injury to the person using it and anyone standing close to it, as well as extensive damage to property. Churches have a duty to provide work equipment which is safe and fit for purpose and the maintenance and safe operation of boilers is guided by the Pressure System Safety Regulations (PSSR) which were introduced in 2000. The PSSR place specific responsibilities onto the user/owner of pressure systems – all systems must be:

- properly constructed and designed;
- installed and regularly examined by a competent person;
- operated safely and properly maintained.
- In addition, those operating the boiler must be appropriately trained.

For more information see the HSE leaflet [Pressure systems: A brief guide to safety](#).



Building work

If your church undertakes a building project of any size then it is likely that you'll be involved in this – either in an advisory capacity or more directly, perhaps as the church contact who engages and manages contractors.



A few pointers:

- it's always sensible to seek recommendations for contractors who have carried out similar work locally. As part of this process check their health and safety policy and insurance arrangements
- ensure that your contractor carries out a full risk assessment before undergoing each job. It is the church's responsibility, as the person engaging the contractor, to ensure that risk assessments and safe systems of work are in place
- if the church is having building work done then the church has duties under the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015 – take a look at the HSE leaflet [Using Contractors: A brief guide](#)
- inform employees, tenants, and regular visitors that contract work is taking place, identifying any issues that may affect health and safety
- if the church is having major building works, or scaffolding is being erected, contact your insurance provider – additional terms may be added to your policy
- check and see if the Work at Height Regulations apply. Full information can be found on the HSE's [Work at Height webpage](#)
- consider providing an induction to all contractors before they start work to make them aware of the church's health and safety policy, access control measures, fire drills and emergency arrangements, first aid facilities and accident reporting requirements.

Asbestos

You'll almost certainly be familiar with asbestos – it's a naturally occurring material which can cause serious diseases – including cancer – if inhaled. Yet it's an area that church health and safety policies and risk assessments often overlook.

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

While H&S is undoubtedly a vitally important and wide-ranging part of church it's quite likely that, having read this booklet and perhaps followed some of the links to other websites, you're feeling pretty overwhelmed by the demands and sheer scope of the role. Don't be. On the whole, most churches are small, comparatively low-risk environments with few if any employees and an understanding of the key legislative requirements combined with a logical and common-sense approach to the church's health and safety policy and risk assessment and knowledge of where to go for more help when necessary, is all that's needed. And don't forget that plenty of help exists – from the HSE's excellent website to the health and safety advice available through Church House.

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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