

Keeping people safe

Health and safety toolkit

Night shelters



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.methodistinsurance.co.uk/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 its Church Council; 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*

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 negotiate, 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.

Precautions you can take*

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 (e.g. gloves, coveralls etc.) for staff where appropriate.

* This list is not exhaustive

Making a start

Action	Guidance
<p>1. Identify the needs you want to address in providing your night shelter service and how these will be met.</p> <p>Decide how you will meet any related legal and governance requirements.</p>	<p>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 complement and support their work can be an effective way of responding to need without undermining or duplicating existing provision.</p> <p>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 provide examples of best practice. Information is available at www.housingjustice.org.uk and www.homeless.org.uk/.</p> <p>If you have 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.</p> <p>Working in partnership could reduce the time you have to spend on organisational administration, which start-up services often underestimate.</p>
<p>2. Check the precautions you have in place are adequate.</p> <p>If they are not, identify any additional ones that are needed and who will be responsible for taking them.</p> <p>Ensure that the precautions you have identified are taken and remain effective.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>Aside from this, it is sensible to plan activities anyway so that your shelter runs smoothly and remains safe for all.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Examples of the things you may need to consider include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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) • 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 procedures etc., updating your fire risk assessment if you have one <p>Continued...</p>

Action	Guidance
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 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 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. <p>In some situations, you may need to make a note of any checks or inspections you make to ensure these precautions are being taken or equipment remains safe.</p> <p>You should correct any defects identified in good time.</p>
<p>3. Consider using a log book for guests.</p>	<p>This will normally contain details of who did and did not arrive; any accidents that occurred etc.</p> <p>The 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.</p>
<p>4. Consider using an agreement ('house-rules') for guests.</p>	<p>It is a good idea to have a guest agreement that is signed by them before using your facility. If possible, these should be kept as simple as possible.</p> <p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>Continued...</p>

Action	Guidance
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pets (except guide/hearing dogs) are not permitted • entry to the premises will not be permitted after a specified time. <p>Some guests may not have English as their first language, so provision will be needed for them so that they understand the rules too.</p>
<p>5. Ensure that employees and volunteers know what precautions to take.</p> <p>Make a note of any information or training that is provided to individuals in these situations.</p>	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • any required emergency procedures • mental health awareness • drug and alcohol awareness • precautions to ensure personal safety. <p>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.</p>
<p>6. Document your arrangements and responsibilities for running a night shelter.</p> <p>Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid.</p>	<p>If you have prepared a health and safety policy, record your arrangements as part of it.</p> <p>You can use our Church Health and Safety Policy template if haven't done this and need one to comply with health and safety law.</p>

Want to know more?

We have produced some other useful resources to help you get started or simply check the adequacy of what you have already done. These are all available at:

www.methodistinsurance.co.uk/healthandsafety

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 authority for your region. This will be freely available on their website.

Information in this document

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Need to contact us?

For further information on health and safety in churches:

Call our Risk Management Advice Line on

0345 600 7531

Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (excluding Bank Holidays).

We may monitor or record calls to improve our service.

Email us at: riskadvice@micmail.co.uk



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Template Guest Agreement

Welcome to:

Dear Guest – Welcome! We hope that you will have a peaceful and restful night with us.

We are a group of people from _____ who are looking to provide help and support to those who do not have a home in our town. If there is any anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, please ask a volunteer. They will do their best to help you.

We will provide you with an evening meal, a bed, breakfast and hospitality. We are also able to provide friendship, support and encouragement to you if you need it.

Our shelter

- Our shelter is run entirely by volunteers. Nobody is being paid to be here. Therefore, we would ask that you treat them and other guests with respect. Please do not use bad language or antisocial behaviour, as you may be asked to leave the shelter if you do.
- Our volunteers will not hand out money or personal details (e.g. home addresses, private telephone numbers, email addresses or other personal information). Please don't ask them to do so.
- You will not be asked for any money during your stay. It is free of charge.
- If you need financial advice or assistance you can speak to _____.

Safety

We want our shelter to be a safe place for everyone. We cannot admit anyone who has:

- controlled drugs or substances
- alcoholic drinks (we have a secure storage area where bottles or tins can be left. They will be returned to you in the morning)
- an offensive weapon.

Other important information

- Smoking is not allowed inside any church buildings at any time.
- In the event of a fire or other emergency you may be asked to leave the shelter. Please follow any instructions given by the volunteers as quickly as possible. The main assembly point is _____ which is located _____
- If you wish to leave valuables, money or other personal items for safekeeping then please speak to _____ They will be returned to you in the morning.
- In the morning, you will be asked if you wish to register for the following night at a different location. If you do reserve a place you MUST book in by _____. If you do not turn up by _____ your place may be given to another guest on the waiting list.

If you are willing to agree to our 'house rules' then please PRINT and SIGN your name below.

Name, Signature, Date, Booked in by: