

Risk Assessment

This guideline provides a rundown of the legislation and best practice relating to risk assessments which churches and groups should consider when organising activities for children, young people and vulnerable adults, and an explanation of why this is important.

What and Why Risk Assessment

A risk assessment is nothing more than a careful examination of what in your work could cause harm to people, so that you can weigh up whether you have taken enough precautions or should do more to prevent harm. The aim is to make sure that no one gets hurt or becomes ill. Accidents and ill health can ruin lives and affect your work.

It is the responsibility of the PCC to ensure that the day to day health and safety issues are dealt with. This is often passed to those responsible for different aspects of the church's ministry. In turn the PCC needs to be kept fully informed as to these issues and should then take action where necessary.

What you need to know

Risk assessments should be suitable and sufficient – they do not have to be perfect!

It is legitimate for your church or organisation to ask you as the children's/youth worker or group leader, to be involved in carrying out the risk assessment since you will be aware of specific issues that relate to the children, young people or vulnerable adults that you work with.

The chief responsibility for checking out the building rests with the PCC, however, this doesn't absolve you from all responsibility. For example, if you discover a light fitting hanging from a thread or a broken window or a damaged stair tread then you have a responsibility to report that to the appointed person – you may even have to cancel your activity or group until the matter is put right.

Your responsibility is to assess the risk involved in the activities that the children, young people or vulnerable adults will be involved in. This may be an informal check each evening before you start, that the building is safe and that the planned activities have been assessed, the risks identified and eliminated or control measures introduced. Where an off-site activity is involved a risk assessment must be carried out. If you are going on a trip or residential you should obtain written or documentary assurance that the activity/venue providers have themselves assessed the risks. You should then carry out a risk assessment of any other factors involved e.g. routes and modes of transport, competence, experience of volunteers etc.

How to carry out a risk assessment

Step 1 – Look for the hazards and write them down.

Hazard means anything that can cause harm. In offices and church environments often the hazards are few and simple. Checking them is common sense, walk around your building/centre and look for hazards that could cause serious harm or affect a number of people.

Step 2 – Decide who might be harmed and how and then write this down Factors like the age, exuberance of the children, young people or vulnerable adults as well as the activity will affect your assessment. If you have people with additional needs using the building then attention needs to be paid to their particular requirements.

Step 3 – Evaluate the risks and decide whether the existing precautions are adequate. Write this down too. Risk is the chance, high or low, that someone will be harmed by the hazard. The risks may be different for different groups of people as some may be more vulnerable than others.

Risk can be measured by consideration of the likelihood of the incidence/injury i.e. 1 = Improbable, 2 = Possible, 3 = Likely, 4 = Very likely, 5 = Certain and by consideration of the severity of the consequences i.e. 1 = Trivial (grazing, soreness), 2 = Minor (small cuts, bruising), 3 = Severe (broken bones), 4 = Major, 5 = Fatal.

By multiplying the likelihood by the severity you can quantify risk. This can assist in prioritising the action that needs to be taken. As a result of the risk assessment you should then draw up an action list and prioritise those risks which are high or could affect the most people. Please note that any occurrence where the outcome could be fatal even if improbable should still be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Step 4 – Record your findings.

Legally, if you have fewer than five employees you do not need to write anything down. However having done all the work it makes sense to keep a written record of what you have done. It also means if there was an incident you can show you have thought it through properly.

Step 5 – Review your assessment and revise it if necessary.

If you bring in new equipment or change the way you work then you will need to go and revisit the assessment - add any of these findings to your original record.

Risk Assessment should influence the way you work, not stop you from working with children, young people or vulnerable adults! It is something you do all the time, all we are saying is that you record it.

Ecclesiastical Insurance has helpful guidance notes (use the search system to locate what you need): www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters/index.aspx

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