



ANYONE HOME?

Julian Free explains why vacant property management calls for a layered approach

The Bank of England recently predicted that the UK's current economic downturn will be the longest on record, resulting in a slowdown of UK construction and commercial activities. This news is expected to further drive up the number of vacant commercial properties in London, which has already seen a 50 percent increase since 2019 due to the rise of the hybrid working model brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar trends are anticipated to follow suit nationwide.

As a result, vacant property maintenance and security is likely to be an important issue for property

owners and landlords going forward. Abandoned properties can be attractive to criminals and intruders looking for an easy target, with inadequate security leaving a property vulnerable to vandalism, damage and theft of valuable equipment. Additionally, issues like fly tipping, squatting and graffiti can prove further nuisances for landlords.

To address these security risks, it is important for property management to take action to deter intrusions and have a rapid response plan in place. In the past, manned guarding was seen as the most effective method for securing vacant properties. However, advances in surveillance systems and forensic marking technology have made remote monitoring

a viable alternative, offering cost and convenience benefits as well as the ability to monitor multiple access points simultaneously.

To effectively protect a vacant property, it is recommended to follow the '5 Ds' methodology of perimeter protection: deter, detect, deny, delay and defend. To that we should also add a 'P' for predict as criminals are often predictable in their behaviour. A lot of intelligence on how to best protect a site can be gained by looking at how other similar sites in the area have been targeted and the techniques that were used.

The process begins by analysing crime trends, risks and the specific vulnerabilities of the site, selecting the best deterrent technologies to discourage criminals, and implementing solutions that will aid in the prosecution of perpetrators if a crime does occur.

As a first line of defence, physical barriers such as walls, fences and gates are an effective security measure that can deter less sophisticated opportunists and limit the scope of more organised thefts. These barriers, which can be installed at key access points, can prevent criminals from using large vehicles or containers to transport stolen goods. Physical barriers can also serve as an effective deterrent to criminals by visibly obstructing their ability to scope out an area and gather information. In addition to reducing theft, well-placed barricades can discourage less severe opportunistic crime such as trespassing, vandalism and fly tipping, saving site operators from future headaches.

To facilitate legitimate projects on-site, access control systems allow security operators to control who is allowed to enter the site and specific areas of the property. By providing visibility and control over access, these systems can facilitate the flow of authorised personnel while restricting access to unwanted individuals. Effective access control systems can include various methods of authentication, such as key cards, biometric scanners or security codes, to ensure that only authorised individuals are granted access. These systems can be configured to allow or deny access to specific areas of the property, depending on the level of security clearance.

In addition to helping to prevent intrusions, access control systems can also improve the overall security of a property by providing a record of who has accessed the premises and when. This can be useful in the event of a security breach or other incident, as it can help to identify potential suspects and provide additional evidence for an investigation.

Beyond securing the perimeter, crime intelligence is a valuable tool in commercial vacant property security as it helps to identify and analyse trends and patterns in criminal activity. Most criminals follow predictable patterns, using similar methods to gain entry and targeting multiple sites in a geographic area within a short period of time. By staying up to date on local crime trends and patterns, property managers can gain a better understanding of the specific security risks that their vacant property may face and take appropriate measures to protect against those risks.

One way to gather crime intelligence is by staying informed about local crime reports and updates from law enforcement agencies. This information can provide valuable insights into the types of crimes that are being committed in the area and the methods being

used by criminals. According to research, rural and sparsely populated areas, such as construction sites and abandoned commercial buildings, tend to be more vulnerable to intrusions due to the lack of witnesses and poor lighting. These properties may be targeted for larger scale thefts of equipment, scrap metal and cables. On the other hand, smaller, temporary construction sites located in more densely populated and well-lit areas are less vulnerable to break-ins, but may still be targeted and have limitations on the security measures that can be implemented. Property managers can use such information to identify potential vulnerabilities in their vacant property and take appropriate steps to address those vulnerabilities.

A comprehensive security solution should be tailored to the specific environment and vulnerabilities of the property. This can be achieved through a site survey, which identifies access points and vulnerabilities, and combines this information with real-time crime analytics to identify high-risk areas and optimise resource allocation. It is not always necessary or practical to make a site impenetrable; rather, the goal is to make the site secure enough that an opportunist would consider the risk of getting caught too high.

ABANDONED PROPERTIES CAN BE ATTRACTIVE TO CRIMINALS LOOKING FOR AN EASY TARGET

Enterprising career criminals will often scout out the site to identify vulnerabilities and opportunities. To prevent intrusions, it is important to have measures in place to detect activity beyond the perimeter. Property managers can consider utilising rapidly deployable self-monitored camera systems and intrusion detection units for round-the-clock surveillance and verified visual monitoring. These modern security hardware options can be deployed at short notice and retained for as long as needed and can be used in conjunction with or as an alternative to traditional manned guarding. Remotely monitored camera surveillance systems also have the advantage of being more cost-effective and requiring less infrastructure, such as facilities for heating, bathrooms and break rooms, compared with traditional manned guarding. They also eliminate many of the compliance issues related to the duty of care for lone workers who may be patrolling unfamiliar surroundings in the dark.

It is also important to clearly communicate the security measures that are in place through prominent signage inside and outside of the property. These measures can act as a deterrent to discourage gangs from targeting the site in the first place. Camera systems should be placed prominently in strategic locations and have low-lighting capabilities and vocal warning systems to deter any potential thieves. They can also be configured to prevent false alarms from passers-by in residential areas, allowing the property to meet its security needs

Advances in surveillance systems and forensic marking technology have made remote monitoring a more viable alternative

while minimising inconvenience to the community. For security managers who are already stretched thin, intrusion detection and video surveillance units linked to an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) can provide additional security on-site. The ARC is staffed by a team of SIA-licenced operators who provide 24/7/365 monitoring, ensuring a rapid response to alarm activations and faster on-site action to deter and detect intruders.

INTELLIGENCE HELPS TO IDENTIFY AND ANALYSE TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

If a determined thief chooses to ignore the various deterrents that have been put in place, forensic marking technology is an additional useful tool in commercial vacant property security as it can provide definitive proof linking a thief to the crime scene. This technology works by applying a unique and traceable substance – such as a spray, gel or liquid – to valuable assets on the property. If an asset is subsequently stolen and recovered, the substance can be detected under UV light and used to provide irrefutable evidence connecting the thief to the crime.

Displaying signs and labels signalling the use of forensic marking can also deter criminals who are familiar with the technology, with some products having a 100 percent conviction rate in contested court cases. In addition to securing a conviction, marking tools and materials with a forensic marking solution makes it much harder for criminals to sell them on, making them less attractive to steal and reducing the amount of loss and operational disruptions.

Equipment or materials being stolen is a particularly significant concern for vacant properties due to the additional vulnerabilities of unoccupied sites. To minimise the risk of this happening, it is recommended to adopt a layered approach to security that prioritises crime prevention. By following this strategy, those responsible for site security can protect their business interests and provide added peace of mind to employees working on the property.

With criminal activity growing more desperate and innovative by the day, a single-layered approach is no longer tenable in securing a vacant property. It is therefore essential that sites adopt a bespoke, comprehensive and layered security strategy, combining various deterrent technologies adapted for their environment. By predicting, deterring and detecting intrusions, organisations can balance both adaptability and cost-effectiveness in their security strategy, while ensuring the smooth continuation of business activity once the property is no longer abandoned ●

Julian Free is National Accounts Manager at Site Security DeterTech.

Intrusion detection and video surveillance units linked to an Alarm Receiving Centre can provide additional security on-site



Picture credit: DeterTech