



ANYONE HOME?

Alexis Potter examines the best way to keep vacant properties secure

Remote working has shaken up our world forever, creating an opportunity to convert office buildings for other purposes, such as homes to help tackle the UK's ongoing housing crisis. A recent enquiry from the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Housing Market & Housing Delivery found that converting empty local authority buildings could provide as many as 20,000 homes alone.

If developers are going to convert properties, significant facility and structural changes need to take place. During this time, vacant properties are havens for criminals looking to make a quick buck. From the start of projects to handovers, property owners should be on the lookout for dangers from thieves to fly tippers that can cause project delays and extra costs. This article will explore the top reasons why empty buildings need protection and how asset owners and developers can best safeguard their investments.

Using fences, boards and barriers to deter unauthorised entry should be the first port of call

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Leaving property unprotected can open property owners up to a myriad of challenges that can scale in severity if left unchecked. For instance, vandalism, like graffiti and broken windows, can set project timelines back as repairs and reobtaining materials is time consuming. While costs may be covered by insurance, losses from delays won't be salvageable. Adding to the physical damage, a psychological impact on the community can lead to devaluation of property.

Fly-tipping is another common problem that has both environmental and financial impacts, posing a danger to property owners pockets, communities and wildlife. These can be well organised operations, where individuals or groups not only dispose of their own waste, but charge others to find a home for theirs. Waste is not only a nuisance to remove, it can also significantly increase the risk of fires in a vacant property, putting entire assets – as well as lives – at risk.

Other opportunistic criminals instead look to remove things from vacant properties. Thieves may be on the lookout for valuable materials like copper in pipes and electrical elements or aluminium in heating systems. Similarly, larger items like boilers and radiators can be valuable spoils. This activity has a knock-on effect and can cause additional problems like damage to properties and increased fire risks.

Given the current economic crisis, squatting is unfortunately still a necessity for many homeless individuals, posing yet another challenge. Being on non-residential property alone is not a crime in itself, so it can take time to evict squatters when a court order is served. These cases can sometimes draw on for weeks or even months, leading to hefty project delays.

It's critical to understand that many of these issues are linked as one can lead to the other. This means property owners should develop an understanding of all the threats to vacant commercial properties and how best to protect against them.

So, what can developers and property owners do to keep their wits about them? The best protection is prevention. Ensuring sites are secure using fences, boards and barriers to deter unauthorised entry should be the first port of call. Importantly, if vehicles can be kept out, it makes transporting stolen material almost impossible.

Periodically checking in on properties is another effective route to help detect issues early on. Some may opt to hire personnel for regular patrols. Naturally, visiting assets can be challenging if there is a long list of distant locations. This is when it makes more sense to install surveillance cameras, alarms and motion sensors for long-distance monitoring, the technology of which is becoming increasingly advanced.

You also want to focus on deterrence. There have been notable advancements in CCTV technology over the last decade that are making security systems more efficient, intelligent, and versatile, catering to a wide range of environments and use cases. The quality of CCTV cameras has improved dramatically and today's cameras offer ultra-high-definition resolutions, allowing for clearer images and better detail, even in low-light conditions. What's more, this crystal clear footage need no longer be stored on reams of tape or local servers thanks to cloud storage. As a result,

property owners have access to virtually unlimited storage, which is safe and can be accessed anywhere. Thanks to advanced motion detection, modern CCTV systems can also differentiate between various types of movements, reducing false alarms and freeing up monitoring teams to carry out other tasks.

INSTALL SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS AND MOTION SENSORS FOR LONG-DISTANCE MONITORING

The search for a security partner should be just as comprehensive as the services they offer. The choice of services a property owner opts for will likely depend on their budget and the value of assets that need protecting. Much like paying for insurance on a property, the higher the value and risks, the greater the investment.

Regardless of the breadth of services and technologies a security provider offers, the value of good customer service should not be undervalued. Responsive teams that communicate transparently with property owners can make all the difference when incidents occur and need following up. This means having an effective monitoring team behind operations, adding that all-important human touch that cannot be matched by technology, no matter how advanced.

While vacant properties present a golden opportunity to address that housing shortage, they also beckon a host of multi-faceted risks for investors if left unguarded. Yet, with the leaps in CCTV technology and proactive security measures, developers and property owners are equipped to turn these silent structures into fortified assets.

As we navigate this new landscape, it's clear that the key to unlocking the potential of these spaces lies in safeguarding them first. Assets owners have a responsibility to protect properties and a proactive approach is key to this. Embracing advanced security solutions isn't just a choice – it's an imperative for a safer future ●

VACANT PROPERTY SECURITY CHECKLIST:

- **Befriend your neighbours:** an observant neighbour can keep an eye on your property when you can't.
- **Remove waste frequently:** overgrown weeds and rubbish indicate no one is home.
- **Have clear and obvious locks:** an ideal visual deterrent to potential intruders.
- **Install clear signage:** studies show that even something as simple as "Beware of the dog" will deter intruders.
- **Install secure fencing:** not only will it keep people out, but it's a great deterrent.
- **Install an alarm and/or CCTV security cameras:** not only a visual deterrent, but also evidence should the worst happen.