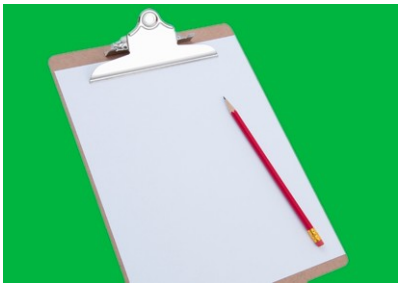
# Controlling the casualty risks associated with unmanned libraries

## Background

**'Necessity is the mother of invention'** is a proverb which will resonate with many Local Government organisations as they continue to look for efficiency savings in order to balance their accounts.

One area where this holds true is within council library services. Embracing innovative technological advances, systems are now available which provide the ability not only to automatically open and close libraries but also to maintain and control self-service kiosks, public access computers, lighting and security without the need for employees to be on-site. The technology aims to provide the flexibility to maximise self-service and to maintain and extend opening hours.



It is easy to understand why the move to unmanned libraries is an attractive proposition to councils experiencing significant financial pressures. However, employees provide vital services that cannot be completely replicated by technological solutions. This guidance note seeks to explore some of the issues that may arise in order to ensure that they are considered and managed effectively. Failure to identify and effectively manage these emerging risks may endanger people's wellbeing and significantly impact on any projected financial savings through costly adverse incidents and associated compensation payments.

## Legal position

The Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 places a common law duty of care on persons in control of premises to ‘take such care as in all the circumstances of the case is reasonable to see that the visitor will be reasonably safe in using the premises for the purposes for which he is invited or permitted by the occupier to be there.’ It is important to note that this Act also states that ‘an occupier must be prepared for children to be less careful than adults’ (ref. 1). As an example, it may be that adults would take notice and act upon warning signs, but it shouldn’t be assumed that children would do the same and so occupiers would need to take this into account when designing safety standards.

The Occupiers' Liability Act 1984 extends this duty on occupiers to include some responsibility to protect uninvited visitors. Uninvited visitors could include people such as the emergency services or even trespassers (ref. 2).

Employers have a general duty placed upon them by section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work. Section 3 of the Act places a general duty on employers to conduct their undertakings in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in their employment who may be affected are not exposed to risks to their health or safety. Furthermore, section 4 of the Act places a general duty upon the controller of premises to take such measures as it is reasonable for a person in his position to take to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the premises are safe and without risks to health (ref. 3).

The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 expand on these duties and are intended to protect the health and safety of everyone in the workplace, and ensure that adequate welfare facilities are provided for people at work (ref. 4).

## Risk assessment

So it is clear. In order to effectively manage the health and safety of its employees and visitors and discharge relevant legal duties, organisations must do all that is reasonably practicable to control the risks within their workplaces (ref. 5). To achieve this, organisations must conduct suitable and sufficient risk assessments in order to identify what might cause harm to individuals and decide whether existing precautions to prevent harm are reasonable. The methodology for risk assessment as promoted by the Health and Safety Executive (ref. 6) involves:

1. Identifying the hazards;
2. Deciding who may be harmed;
3. Evaluating the risks;
4. Recording your significant findings;
5. Regularly reviewing your risk assessment.

Generally, you need to do everything ‘reasonably practicable’ to protect people from harm. This means balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble.

You should look at what you’re already doing and the control measures you already have in place and ask yourself: Can I get rid of the hazard altogether? If not, how can I control the risks so that harm is unlikely?

The risk assessment process will need to consider:

1. Existing risks within the library environment in order to ensure to ensure that the precautions remain reasonable once the transition has been made to unmanned status.

It is important to recognise that the removal of permanent employees from the work environment and replacing them with IT enabled services fundamentally changes the risk dynamics of that environment. New assessments of existing risks will be required.

**2** New risks which may be generated through the use of IT and the new unmanned operating procedures.

Consideration must also be given within the risk assessment process to any potential new risks which may be created through the removal of permanent on-site employees and the implementation of new technologies and operating procedures. On-site employees provide vital functions which are not always recognised within job descriptions and it is essential that organisations plan for how these functions will continue to be provided in their absence. It may be helpful to consider the risks within the following key areas:

**People**

Examples would include dealing with violence or aggression, antisocial behaviour, vandalism, accidents and ill-health, safeguarding of children and vulnerable persons etc.

**Processes**

Examples would include dealing with accidents, incidents, and emergency situations (including the timely summoning of the emergency services and evacuations), and partial or complete technology failure.

**Environment**

Examples would include identifying and making safe slip and trip hazards, fire safety precautions, power failure events, flooding, spillages, property damage etc.

**Equipment**

Examples would include maintaining electronic or electrical devices and dealing with electrical faults or malfunctions (including loss of power), and the maintenance of fire fighting equipment and first-aid provisions etc.

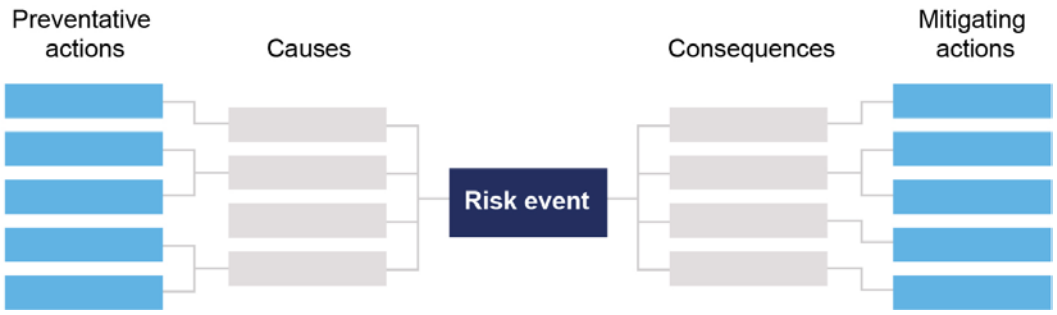
It is important for organisations to recognise that visitors may not have the same appreciation of the risks presented within its premises as the controller would be expected to maintain. In these circumstances, the absence of on-site employees to provide valuable supervision, instruction, guidance or intervention will need to be taken into account and carefully considered within the risk assessment process.

To assist organisations in effectively identifying, assessing, and managing the risks presented by unmanned library environments, the following techniques should be considered:

### Bow tie analysis

Organisations should consider undertaking a Bow Tie Analysis as part of its risk management approach to unmanned libraries. It is a simple diagrammatic way of describing and analysing the pathways of a risk from causes to consequences, and is used to present a risk depicting its full range of potential causes and consequences.

By mapping the main pathways of a risk, it can assist organisations in identifying effective actions to prevent or mitigate the undesired consequences of that risk.



## Accident histories

An essential component of any effective risk assessment process is the consideration of adverse events, including near misses, which have occurred previously within the library environment. Organisations should consider whether the circumstances that led to previous adverse events or near misses could be replicated within the unmanned library environment. If so, what would the consequences of those events be if there were no employees on-site to intervene and manage them effectively?

## Scenario planning and business continuity management

As well as considering past experience organisations should conduct scenario planning exercises to ensure that all likely or foreseeable events have been identified and addressed within the risk assessment process. For example, scenario planning may include asking questions such as:

"If our unmanned library suffered complete power supply failure what might occur and how could we effectively protect the health, safety and welfare of any members of the public within the library during such times?"

"If a member of the public suffered an accident, ill-health, or threat to their personal safety within an unmanned library, how quickly could we identify the event and respond accordingly?"

"If we lost partial or complete CCTV monitoring capability, should we close the library?"

Scenario planning is also an effective component of business continuity management activities. Business continuity management is defined as 'the capability of the organization to continue delivery of products or services at acceptable predefined levels following a disruptive incident'. Continuity planning is essential if employees are no longer located on-site and an increased reliance on technology becomes apparent (ref. 7).

Developing contingency arrangements in the event of partial or complete technology failure will assist the organisation in managing disruptive incidents and safeguarding the welfare of those people who may be within the library environment at such times.

## Comment

Innovative technological advancements over recent years have been significant, and continue at an unrelenting pace. The advantages of providing IT-enabled services are obvious and appealing, however, these advancements should be considered carefully against every organisation's continuing duty to protect the health, safety and well-being of those people who use or may be exposed to such advancements.

An absence of on-site employee presence does not result in an absence of duty to those who may use that environment, but it does require an organisation to think and act dynamically in order to continue to satisfy its legal obligations and manage associated risks effectively.

Employees provide invaluable functions, such as emergency response and intervention, which stretch beyond their job description and are not easily replicated by technology. Therefore, organisations must ensure that all precautions are reasonable in these circumstances, and are implemented and maintained throughout all hours of unmanned operation. Risk assessments must be well documented and communicated to all persons who may be affected by the risks. Robust operational procedures (including emergency procedures) must be developed, documented, communicated, and tested to ensure their suitability and that all parties fully understand their roles and are able to undertake them efficiently and effectively.

## References


**1** Occupiers Liability Act 1957. Available from:
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/5-6/31/contents

**2** Occupiers Liability Act 1984. Available from:
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/3/contents

**3** The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. Available from:
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1974/37/contents

**4** The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Available from:
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1992/3004/contents/made

**5** The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Available from:
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/3242/contents/made

**6** Risk assessment - A brief guide to controlling risks in the workplace, Health and Safety Executive, INDG163 (rev4), published 08/14. Available from:
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg163.htm

**7** Societal security - Business continuity management systems - Guidance, BS ISO 22313:2012, British Standards Institute. Available from:
shop.bsigroup.com/en/ProductDetail/?pid=000000000030279770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## Get in touch

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