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Beyond COVID-19:
Reopening of commercial buildings

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This document has global applicability and is designed to give support and advice on the preparations and considerations for the reopening of commercial buildings once pandemic lockdown restrictions are lifted. Each case will vary, so it should not be relied upon as a formal statement of RICS best practice.

The document does not give legal advice. If any legal risks are identified, advice should be sought from a legal professional. Recommendations and updates from relevant authorities should always be followed.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge to all professionals involved in managing and maintaining buildings safely and securely during this crisis. Before anyone can return to a building there is much that needs to be considered and done to ensure that people are able to return to a safe environment

This document is intended to be a useful guide to help building managers, commercial tenants and landlords identify and plan to mitigate the main risks arising from reopening a building that may be applied to all asset types.

However, due to the varying requirements of different types of buildings, for instance, shopping centre, offices, retail parks and so on, certain recommendations will not be appropriate in all circumstances, and consideration should be given to any additional risks that arise in particular circumstances.

We are most grateful to the team at SAFE Shopping Centers for their support and contribution to this guide.

Paul Bagust

RICS, Global Property Standards Director

2. Core steps for continuous risk assessment and crisis management

The current situation is fast changing and requires constant monitoring and assessment, as plans are made for the reopening of a building. Before making a decision on reopening a building, it is advisable to:

- have a clear overview of the current situation, evaluate any sources of information and follow official recommendations, as well as having asset objectives based on current guidance

- plan based on current information and 'what if' scenarios

- communicate to relevant stakeholders about the current situation and any planned actions

- implement plans to reach the overall objectives and update them regularly without being afraid to make changes if the situation requires it.

3. Planning

It is recommended that clear objectives and priorities for the reopening of a building are established, for example, around:

- the safety and security of staff, tenants and visitors

- ensuring the continuous operation of the building, or part thereof

- supporting tenants

- conducting a risk assessment for reopening, making sure to include within it any reputational risks

- developing a plan for the reopening and including major tenants if possible

- preparing for a second wave of COVID-19 and developing contingency plans to handle such an eventuality

- keeping an eye on the desired outcome but adapting any actions on the current situation and risk assessment.

3.1 Planning for building operations (building managers and tenants)

A decision should be made on whether there is a need to draft additional policies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. These may include policies around working from home, sick leave, handwashing, sanitation and so on. It is also recommended to:

- have a staff continuity plan (e.g. working in shifts or from home with only part of the workforce in the office at the same time to avoid cross-contamination and the risk of quarantine for the entire management team)

- have a procedure for tenants and service providers to report directly to building management in case of confirmed or suspected infection of staff

- conduct a review of existing emergency protocols based on the prevailing situation and staff count

- update staff lists and contact information and ensure that building management has these for all tenants

- make a plan for goods delivery and temporary storage

- set up meeting areas separate from the building management offices to avoid cross-contamination

- plan for differentiated/extended/early opening hours to support vunerable groups

- coordinate delivery services for people in quarantine

- take any other steps that would minimise queuing on site.

Plans and objectives should be discussed and shared as they are drafted, and tenants should be supported by advice on safety routines and its implementation.

3.2 Safety and security

Many individuals (including tenants, visitors and staff) will be under extreme pressure due to the current crisis, and emotions may be running high.

Some suggestions to keep staff and visitors safe include:

- reviewing and adapting emergency response and evacuation procedures based on prevailing conditions

- if required by restrictions, planning to limit access and access points to the building, and placing security at the doors to ensure compliance with the restrictions

- establishing and communicating a queue-management policy if social distancing is to be maintained and to enforce government policy

- installing Plexiglas sheets around the reception area, and information and service desks

- putting procedures in place for a person suspected of infection, including the availability of an isolation area (preferably outdoor); the designation of an isolation route to quarantine and transport pick-up areas; and the disinfection of areas following a suspected infection, including a hazardous/hospital waste container near the isolation area.

3.3 Cleaning services

Plans should be made to increase the frequency of cleaning for toilets, nursing rooms, play areas, food courts, and other risk-prone areas, and to ensure regular disinfection of high-touch installations such as ATMs, lift buttons, interactive navigational displays and so on. Other suggestions are:

- ensuring the availability of suitable cleaning chemicals

- ensuring there is proper protection, guidance and training in place for all cleaning staff

- planning how to close off and disinfect any area, if needed, after a suspected infection

- if possible, using one contractor to disinfect both common areas and tenant premises. This will help to provide optimal quality assurance, smooth coordination and quick actions.

4. Communication

Below are some steps to ensure clear and effective communications:

- preparing a reopening actions schedule

- once the reopening date is known, communicating it transparently and openly to all relevant parties in the sequence of the countdown schedule

- communicating to relevant stakeholders about the current situation, objectives and intended actions

- communicating policy changes clearly and putting systems in place to ensure any policies are upheld

- reviewing communication plans and preparing statements for possible scenarios

- ensuring staff are aware of what they should say and where to refer journalists and any media enquiries

- monitoring social media and acting swiftly to stop any rumors or false information

- keeping a continuous dialogue with tenants/staff in order to detect and

manage any issues as early as possible

- for buildings that are open to the public, it is important to be visible within the local community and communicate on the situation and any planned initiatives
- reviewing and increasing in-building communications, with rules and guidelines related to COVID-19 (e.g. any communication regarding social distancing and directions to the nearest handwash/disinfection facilities).

5. Steps to take before reopening

5.1 Preparation of technical systems

The extent of preparations needed might differ depending on how long a building has been fully or partially closed, and the level of maintenance carried out while the building was out of operation. Local authorities' guidelines and insurance companies' advice should be followed before reopening a building.

5.2 Fire safety

It is advisable to test the following fire safety systems before reopening a building:

- fire pumps
- fire alarm systems
- checking emergency exits and escape routes to ensure they are free from obstructions
- the functionality of emergency exit doors
- automatic door releases, speakers and so on
- systems for uninterruptible power supply

It is also advisable to conduct a full property walk prior to reopening the building.

5.3 CCTV

It is advisable to check CCTV systems and picture quality for each camera to verify that the lenses are clean and have not been tampered with.

5.4 Access control systems and burglar alarms

Before reopening a building it is advisable to:

- check the functionality of access control systems and burglar alarms

- review who has access to the building and update any permits

- confirm you have an up-to-date tenants' staff list and that access is restricted to only those that require it.

5.5. Other checks and considerations before reopening

Below is a list of checks that should be carried out before reopening a building:

- potable water systems, including a new legionella test, if required

- sewage functionality, including grease traps

- toilets and cubicles, including distress alarm functionality

- lifts and escalators functionality.

It is also advisable to:

- update communication at entrances with COVID-19 guidelines and any specific house rules

- install floor stickers to indicate the distance between queuing visitors, for instance at ATMs and other relevant areas

- provide hand-sanitizing opportunities

- install in-building communication regarding social distancing and directions to the nearest handwash/disinfection facilities within buildings with large common areas accessible by the public.

5.6 Tenant reopening

For tenant reopenings, below is a list of advisable checks and updates:

- emergency exits routes and doors

- presence and expiry date of fire extinguishers

- emergency protocols based on the prevailing situation and staff count

- updates to staff lists and contact information (these, and any new policies, should be shared with building management)

- plans for goods delivery and temporary storage

- plans for managing queues (if conducted with the tenant's security staff, these should be coordinated with building management)

- floor stickers for queuing and Plexiglas sheets for additional protection
- in-store notices to remind visitors to respect social distancing requirements.

6. Managing the building after reopening

Even once the immediate crisis has passed and the property is about to reopen, it should be remembered that staff and tenants may be dealing with crises of their own, both personal and professional.

6.1 General considerations

It is important to:

- keep an open dialogue with service suppliers
- monitor the implementation of policies and act to strengthen communication or enforcement if necessary
- have a back-up plan if service suppliers are not able to sustain their operation due to personnel or financial issues
- perform regular disinfection of the workplace, including PC keyboards and mobile phones
- prepare for a quick transition to remote working, for example encouraging staff to take laptops and other materials they may need, home with them each day
- ensure tenants and service providers report directly to building management in case of confirmed or susupected infection of staff
- be visible and available to staff, tenants and service providers, and manage issues proactively to avoid them escalating.

6.2 Tenant operations

Below are some important considerations for tenants, who should:

- ensure that employees are fully aware of proper handwashing protocols
- ensure that employees who are unwell do not come to work
- ensure that all employee emergency contact information is up to date
- establish reporting routines to building management in case of employees who are unwell

- make scheduling adjustments to allow for additional disinfecting procedures

- ensure that employees are aware of COVID-19 prevention information and protocols

- ensure that employees understand procedures if they exeperience COVID-19 symptoms

- carry out frequent cleaning of high-touch areas such as counters and door handles

- where appropriate, limit cash handling and close contact with customers

- continue to communicate any changes in policies and normal routines to staff and customers

- perform regular compliance checks

- update staff and contact lists regularly and share them with the building management company.

6.3 Visitor management

Below are some recommendations for the management of visitors to the building. It is advisable that management:

- keep communication at entrances updated with COVID-19 guidelines and any specific house rules

- monitor the effectiveness of floor stickers to indicate the distance between queuing visitors, for instance at ATMs and other relevant areas

- consider whether other queue-management infrastructure is needed

- support tenants to comply with government policy

- keep hand-sanitizing facilities well stocked and maintained

- keep in-building communication regarding social distancing and directions to the nearest handwash/disinfection facilities updated (this is especially important for shopping centres and other buildings with large common areas accessible by the public)

- apply differentiated/extended/early opening hours as a service to at-risk and vulnerable groups if this is part of the plan

- monitor queues and take any additional steps to minimise them.

6.4 Security

Below are some recommendations for security in buildings that have reopened. The management of these buildings should:

- review and adapt emergency response and evacuation procedures based on prevailing conditions

- be prepared to support tenants with queue management
- monitor the effectiveness of limiting the access and access points to the building, and place security at the doors to ensure compliance with the restrictions
- require the security company to check and enforce compliance with any new rules, and health and safety guidelines in the building.

6.5 Cleaning services

It is advisable that those responsible for the cleaning services of a building:

- follow local goverment recommendations
- review cleaning chemicals in use
- monitor the availability of suitable chemicals
- increase the frequency of cleaning for toilets, nursing rooms, play areas, and other risk-prone areas
- regularly disinfect high-touch installations such as ATMs, lift buttons, interactive navigational displays and so on
- ensure that proper protection, guidance notes, and training for all cleaning staff are maintained and updated
- monitor the operation of the plan of how to close off and disinfect any area, if a suspected infection occurs.

Annex

Asset-specific advice

A. 1 Shopping centres

A.1.1 Security

When access to the shopping areas is through manual doors, these should be kept constantly open to avoid people touching the doors and face the risk of contamination. Other considerations are:

• the number of people inside the shopping centre, which should be monitored and managed

• obtaining confirmation that shopping centres have a first-aid certified security personnel during opening hours

• assessing and communicating first-aid procedures, with special consideration given to cross-infection risks

• putting procedures in place for a person suspected of infection and the availability of an isolation area (preferably outdoor).

A.1.2 Maintenance

The following should be considered when maintaining a reopened building:

• ventilation – fresh air supply in the shopping areas should be maximised

• the installation of new filters in the air handling unit which should be disinfected weekly

• full ventilation in the toilets, 24/7

• avoiding duct cleaning during the post-pandemic period.

A.1.3 Waste management

Waste produced by a person suspected of COVID-19 should be treated as hazardous/hospital waste. It is recommended that a container for this kind of waste be placed near the isolation area for people suspected of having contracted COVID-19.

A.1.4 Lifts and escalators

For lifts and escalators, the following steps are recommended:

• placing a signage at the entrance/lobby informing of the maximum allowed capacity of lifts and priority of use

• placing a signage at escalators according to local social distancing rule (this could be indicated using stickers on the steps).

A.1.5 People circulation

It is recommended that people walk on the right-hand side in order to avoid crossing paths and that this is indicated by using stickers.

A.1.6 Seating areas

Tables and chairs should be rearranged (or blocked) to allow for the 2m social distance, or according to local rules.

A. 2 Hotels

The following are considerations specific to the reopenings of hotels:

- using prepayment and express services to avoid contact and speed up the check-in or check-out processes
- using a guest room as a quarantine room to use if a guest becomes unwell during their stay or as a quarantine area for suspected cases
- designating an isolation route to quarantine and transport pick-up areas
- putting plans in place to transport guests to designated healthcare facilities or hospitals
- preparing an evacuation plan for the remaining individuals within the property
- making arrangements for contact tracing (e.g. using a Contract Tracing Form where one is available)
- having an agreed and safe routine for room service (i.e. delivering to outside the door, not inside)
- protecting printed menus and hotel information guides with plastic covers that can be wiped and disinfected, or switching to an in-room tablet, which is easier to clean
- ensuring routines are in place for minimising contamination from luggage handling
- where feasible and applicable, having processes in place to check temperatures and looking out for respiratory symptoms in hotel guests and staff
- managing queues and limiting the number of guests gathering in or outside the establishment
- seating management (i.e.ensuring a safe distance between tables and between seats)
- individuals and family members who wish to seat together should continue to do so, but there should be a safe distance maintained between different groups of guests.

A.3 Offices

A.3.1 Landlords

It is recommended that landlords start evaluating the need for change within the office areas and ask their tenants how they plan to respond as they begin to return with their workforce to the office. Questions to ask include:

1. Building access: how will building access for employees, visitors and vendors change once buildings are occupied?

2. Common areas: how will common and shared spaces like receptions, lifts, amenity spaces, toilets, bicycle storage areas and so on be cleaned and maintained until things return to normal?

3. Cleaning protocols: are cleaning staff trained on safety protocols and cleaning methods? Will they wear masks and personal protective equipment while cleaning? Will this need to be changed between tenant spaces?

4. Cleaning specifications: are additional cleaning services needed and how will those be provided?

5. Air filtration: will air filters be changed and will filter material be upgraded to higher filtration and efficiency?

A.3.2 Floor planning

It is recommended that plans are made and risk areas mapped out on a floor plan of the workplace. An assessment should be performed to identify the spaces that provide the highest risk of contamination and a roadmap created for how to reduce surface transmission through increased cleaning and behavioural protocols.

A.3.3 Other recommendations

It is recommended that an agreement is sought with all the relevant stakeholders to:

• identify and define risk areas (e.g. reception, break-out areas, toilets, stairwells, exits and vending areas, among others) and agree strategies to manage them

• develop office protocols and processes for reoccupancy

• communicate to staff all the steps that are being taken to protect them, as well as the behavioural changes needed to keep everybody safe.

The goal is to make a safe transition back into the office.

Other useful tips are:

• providing wipes and cleaning materials that allow individuals to clean these items as used

- putting up signage that reminds and educates individuals on the protocols and their role in maintaining a safe environment

- developing standards and certification processes

- putting up a Plexiglas shield for the concierge

- encouraging and regulating the use of stairs, perhaps recommending the use of lifts to go up only

- programming lifts to open automatically to avoid touching call buttons (or increasing the cleaning of lift buttons)

- using key card readers for manoeuvring the lift

- adopting a one-way-only approach for circulation and indicating this with stickers/signs

- delivering goods and food only to the lobby areas and not to office floors

- increasing space by reducing seating in conference rooms

- encouraging flexible working hours to avoid rush-hour gatherings at bottle necks such as lifts and access control points.

A.3.4 Infected cases

If possible, people with suspected infections should use a dedicated lift/ staircase that can be sealed off and sanitised separately.

Tenants should have their own response plan and know what to do in case of a suspected infection.

All suspected cases should be reported.

About SAFE Shopping Centers

Headquartered in Sweden, SAFE Shopping Centers is an independent advisory company and certification body, supporting the real estate and retail community.

SAFE Shopping Centers comprises asset-, risk- and crisis management experts with vast experience in delivering solutions for strengthening the resilience, mitigating non-financial risks, and improving operational excellence at retail, offices, and hospitality destinations worldwide.

You can contact SAFE at enquiries@safeshoppingcenters.com or through their website at www.safeshoppingcenters.com

Delivering confidence

We are RICS. Everything we do is designed to effect positive change in the built and natural environments. Through our respected global standards, leading professional progression and our trusted data and insight, we promote and enforce the highest professional standards in the development and management of land, real estate, construction and infrastructure. Our work with others provides a foundation for confident markets, pioneers better places to live and work and is a force for positive social impact.

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