

Improving your emergency planning: optimising the role of the soft services team in Facilities Management

2 years ago



Insight from Rob Whiffing, Security Excellence and Projects Director, Sentinel Group

Emergency planning is a critical aspect of facilities management in the UK. By using the soft services team effectively, you can minimise the danger to your people in the event of an emergency.

In this blog post, we look at the practical ways of optimising the role of the soft services team in emergency response planning.

Develop the risk assessment and emergency response plan

The first step is to prepare a thorough risk assessment of the facility. Think about what happens in the event of fire, a natural disaster, or security breaches.

Once you've identified the risks, Facilities Managers can develop a robust emergency response plan, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the soft services team. Key things to include are the evacuation procedures, communication protocols, and coordination with emergency services.

Train your staff

Next, provide training to the soft services team. Training helps people feel more confidence in unfamiliar situations. When emergencies happen, people are less likely to panic if they have some idea of the 'correct' response. Some helpful training includes courses like: first aid, how to use the fire extinguishers,

and the procedures they are supposed to follow in an emergency.

While you don't have to train every member of staff in first aid, everybody needs to know the drill for an emergency. You may receive groans and protests at the thought of a fire drill, but it's the best way to improve your responses. It gives you the opportunity to identify areas of improvement, and ways to speed up evacuation.

One thing that often gets overlooked is the maintenance and availability of the right equipment. Most people take for granted that the first aid kit will be fully stocked, and that they'll work out how to use a fire extinguisher when the time comes. But that's not always a given. Don't forget to train the soft services team on the location and usage of these resources. When they're familiar with the emergency equipment, their response is swift and effective.

Adapting the response to different emergencies

Getting out of the building is one response. But what do you do if you can't get into the building? Have you covered that in your emergency planning?

The third response to think about is when you can't leave the building. Make sure that staff know where the safe spaces are internally.

Unfortunately you can't dismiss the threat of a firearms attack or a terrorism related incident, during which you may not be able to leave. While these events are very rare, you need to train your staff in how to react, just in case the worst happens.

In short, the advice from the police is run, hide, tell. Run to a place of safety, hide from the threat (don't confront the attackers) and call 999.

Maintain your security

Access control systems can disable when the alarms sound. This creates a security risk amid the potential confusion of an emergency situation. You can mitigate this risk with well-trained security teams. Once they're aware that the sounding of an alarm can pose a security risk, they are on guard against suspicious activities.

You should place your team at each of the access points to your facility, to make sure that only authorised individuals are allowed into the building. During an emergency, those authorised individuals are very few people indeed. Members of staff will not be allowed re-entry until the threat is cleared. That makes the security officers' tasks a little easier as it's just a straight 'no' to anybody trying to gain access to the building during an emergency.

Have back-up communication

With all the moving pieces of an emergency procedure, it's important that you have clear communication between your team. In most cases, mobile phones will work. But phones can lose coverage in a fire or during a natural disaster. Make sure there are two-way radios or a dedicated communication system available for emergency scenarios.

Continuous improvement

Finally, emergency planning isn't a one-off exercise. It should be an ongoing process that adapts to changing circumstances. Regularly review and update your emergency response plan so that you can be confident that no gaps or deficiencies have opened up over time.

After each emergency or drill, take stock of the response. Was it quick enough? Did people use the lifts? Did the security guards cover all the access points? Take feedback from people and time the response. With this information, you can make sure your emergency planning remains robust and upholds professional standards.