



SAFE AS HOUSES

Security around your rental property is more important than ever. Aside from adequate window latches and door locks being amongst proposed building WOF criteria, a secure house helps to secure tenants. By **Carolyn Brooke**

SECURITY AND SAFETY is as important to tenants as it is to you in your own home. While the initial costs and ongoing maintenance of a full-blown burglar alarm system won't make it a suitable option for all rental properties, there are many easy steps you can take to provide a safe and secure home for your tenants.

Outdoor sensor lights, safety catches on windows, door locks, safety stickers on glass, smoke alarms, handrails and chimney sweeps don't cost a lot to do but will improve everyday life. Tenants will rent properties they feel safe in and will probably pay a little bit more as well as stay longer.

LATCH ON TO THE BASICS

Many aspects of security and safety are common sense, says Mark Trafford, of Maintain to Profit. But unfortunately he often sees landlords overlooking the basics like fixing window latches and door locks, especially in older houses.

“It’s one of the biggest frustrations for tenants when landlords don’t fix door locks or window locks, tenants will even leave because of it,” Trafford says.

“It’s about imagining that you and your family were living in the property, so if you do it in your own home then do it in your rentals.”

For the property’s own health, it is especially important to make sure bathroom and laundry windows can be left opened safely for ventilation purposes.

“Tenants don’t always open windows, so it’s important to having security stays.”

Locks on garage doors are another important aspect for tenants as often they will be storing valuable equipment or sports gear in there.

When installing a new door lock, opt for quality hardware over anything cheap as you will get what you pay for. Cheap locks are easier to break. Remember, too that rekeying a lock is more expensive than buying a new one.

It is a good idea to check all window and door locks at each inspection. Look out for door swells during winter as these cause problems with opening and shutting doors. Door swells can be a hassle to live with and can cause tenants to use extra force with the door and damage it.

LIGHT UP SECURITY

Outdoor security lighting near entry and exit points, pathways and steps allow tenants to get in and out of the house safely at night. If a garage is separate to the house then ensure there is also adequate lighting between the garage and the house.

A sensor light fitted and wired in should cost \$150 to \$250 per light. In secluded areas, that can’t be seen such as at the back of a house or down the side, also consider installing security lighting as a deterrent to intruders.

For all-night parameter lighting where appropriate, low energy LED light bulbs can be used to reduce energy costs.

PROACTIVE MEASURES

Smoke alarms are of course a basic safety measure. Make sure smoke alarms are fitted correctly according to instructions



HAVING A SMOKE ALARM HARD-WIRED INTO MAINS POWER GIVES A BACK-UP WHEN BATTERIES FAIL

and cover bedrooms and living areas, a minimum starting point should be one installed in the hallway closest to bedrooms.

Smoke alarms should be placed on ceilings as smoke rises and moves along this surface but if, for some reason this is not practical, then the alarm should be within 100mm of the ceiling.

The New Zealand Fire Service attends more than 3500 house fires each year and 80% of the fatal fires are where smoke alarms are not installed or not working.

Ionised, photoelectric and hard-wired alarms are the three choices, and all need to be replaced every 10 years. The Fire Service recommends long-life photoelectric smoke alarms. These may cost a little more but the

long-life battery will save time and money. This type of alarm is designed to pick up smouldering fires and won’t be set off by burnt toast.

Ionised smoke alarms are the most common types of alarm. These cost less than photoelectric alarms but the battery needs to be replaced every year.

Having a smoke alarm hard-wired in to mains power gives a back-up when batteries fail. A hard-wired alarm would cost about \$200 per alarm. A further measure is an interconnected system where all alarms throughout the house sound when one is activated.

Let tenants know that the best way to stop a smoke alarm sounding if it goes off accidentally is to fan it with a tea towel as this

will avoid disabling the device by removing the battery. It is recommended to clean smoke alarms to keep them free from dust and to test the alarm regularly.

Tenants are often poor at changing batteries, so it’s a good idea to take spare batteries to inspections.

ELECTRICAL

Broken or cracked electrical sockets are a no-no and should be fixed immediately. Also replace any electrical switches that feel loose or wobbly.

When buying an older property, Mike Clemmett, of Laser Electrical Rosebank recommends having the wiring checked out.

“Most wiring you can’t see so it’s hard for owners to tell but if the place is pre-1970s then the wiring probably needs to be redone,” Clemmett says.

Thermal imaging is another way to check for electrical hotspots in a house but can be costly to do. Modern cabling should last between 30 to 50 years and cost \$4000 to \$5000 for the average house.

If your property has too few electrical sockets then have more put in to discourage tenants from overloading the existing ones.

Multi-plugs should be replaced every five years, Clemmett says. Multi-plugs in nature are a temporary solution and he advises adding in more electrical sockets if there is a shortage.

“Multi-plug boxes are one of the common places for a house fire to start, when there are lots of appliances plugged into them and they overload and catch on fire,” he says.

“They are often tucked away behind a computer or a TV and are forgotten about.”

Encourage tenants to purchase quality multi-plugs with a safety switch and to check them regularly for black marks,



DISCOUNTS ON INSURANCE PREMIUMS ARE USUALLY GIVEN TO HOUSEHOLDS WITH WORKING ALARMS

melting or any other sign of fault. Don’t overload them with heavy use appliances like heaters.

ONE STEP FURTHER

If your rental property is in an area with a high-burglary rate or an affluent suburb then an alarm can be a real drawcard to tenants. Discounts on insurance premiums are usually given to households with working alarms, another benefit.

When looking at installing an alarm system the key considerations are layout and functionality, Clemmett says.

“People need to think about functionality of the system, where they will have keypads, will they have remote controls for garage doors or for alarms?”

The average house has four sensors placed near possible entry points and sometimes in master bedrooms or other areas where valuables might be kept. For practicality, key panels are placed near the most common entry or exit point.

A fully installed and good quality alarm should cost between \$800 and \$1200. Having the alarm monitored if away for extended periods is an option for tenants although there is an ongoing cost. However, it is free to have a set up where a cell phone is alerted when the alarm goes.

The negative side of alarms is that they are set off accidentally from time to time or when people are away and it can be a pain for neighbours. Alarms also require some ongoing maintenance and servicing. ■