

And there was light

28 March 2017

Jamie Willsdon stresses the importance of specifying the right lighting and planning for maintenance

Have you ever looked at the way the energy bills are split for the blocks you manage? If not, you could be in for a shock. More than 70% of the charges for a typical residential block could be accounted for by the lighting alone. Many blocks around the country have outdated lighting systems, and a good proportion of these leave communal lighting on all day and night, even where stairwells and corridors are flooded with natural illumination.

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The cost of energy is only going one way ? up. So it is no surprise that in leasehold apartment buildings, property managers frequently take the blame for generating sky-high fees. Even in blocks that have occupancy sensors installed, many units are poorly commissioned, leading to costly damage to lighting and additional maintenance charges that are ultimately passed on to residents.

Another common cause for complaint among leaseholders is the issue of failed lights, with outdated installations being particularly vulnerable. This means endlessly changing light bulbs, which sends the wrong message to prospective flat buyers and tenants, and does nothing to enhance the reputation of the company responsible for managing the block. A badly lit block says clearly: ?This building is poorly maintained ? avoid it.?

Poor lighting makes a block look rundown, reducing its kerb appeal and ultimately its value, while failed lights are also a serious health and safety issue. Both factors increase the risk of accidents for residents and visitors and raise the threat of legal action being taken against residential management company directors and their property managers.

Plan your maintenance

Planned maintenance has an important role. It takes more energy to run a failing unit, putting strain on the rest of the system while reducing overall performance and output. And once lighting equipment has deteriorated to the point of total failure, the only option is complete replacement. The average light fitting, without maintenance, will probably run for between 4 and 6 years. Then it will need to be replaced at an average cost, including labour, of around ?150. Over the same period, the planned maintenance cost would amount to a matter of pennies each month.

Planned maintenance scheduling (PMS) has been around for decades, but too few property managers include it as standard in their business operation. The key is to programme the replacement of outdated lighting into the PMS for your block so that the new or upgraded system is installed at the same time as the next refurbishment of the common areas. This way, any cosmetic damage will be repaired at the same time, keeping cost to a minimum.

What else can property managers do to save residents money and protect their own professional reputation? Here are some straightforward options:

- **install occupancy detectors:** a simple recommission can save thousands of pounds in wasted maintenance costs;
- **commission occupancy detectors correctly** to maximise saving from use of natural light and to prevent damage to fittings;
- **install an LED system;**
- ensure your maintenance contract includes a **routine servicing visit;** and
- lighting companies may offer **free site surveys** to evaluate your systems ? take advantage of this service.

It is vital to consider whether or not lighting installation in a block with high energy charges is fit for purpose. High numbers of maintenance call-outs should ring alarm bells. One solution is to consider retrofitting LEDs as a simple and in most cases straightforward way to reduce maintenance and cut the cost of block lighting. The return on investment is estimated at around 20 months for a typical scheme.

A new LED system with integral occupancy detectors could save residents more than 70% in energy costs and, once installed, maintenance should be cost-neutral for around 5 years. LEDs are environmentally friendly and cheap to run, saving your client from spending time and money on maintenance. Around 98% of LED fittings can be retrofitted into existing positions with no negative impact on the daily running of the building or its existing decor. Every block is different, and as LEDs improve illumination levels, a lighting design can be chosen in a colour that suits the specific environment.

Doing the maths

Here is an example of the savings to be made by replacing outdated lighting with LEDs.

Example

An underground car park has 50 fluorescent light fittings that are switched on 24/7. The cost to run is around:

- ?22/day; and
- ?7,970/year.

Costs for the equivalent LED fittings using integral occupancy detectors are around:

- ?0.40/day; and
- ?145/year.

Typical supply and installation costs for LEDs are ?9,500.

This represents a return on investment of just less than 15 months, which does not include the ongoing saving of ?7,500 each year made simply by not wasting energy. And that is just in the car park.

In the case of blocks that do not have reserve funds or are strapped for cash, a lighting upgrade need not be an impossibility. Leasing is one option to consider, whereby a new lighting installation is fitted on a buy now, pay later basis. For more information on funding options, see [Future Lighting](#) .

Developers take note

Wholesale lighting failure is not just a problem in older blocks: it can be just as bad in new-build schemes. Not enough thought is given to designing and planning a lighting scheme that will work with the mechanics of the building and how residents will use it.

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Similarly, too little consideration may be given to specifying low-maintenance lighting that will keep costs to a reasonable level. Lighting may be specified that looks good for a few months but is not fit for purpose. As a result, effective, regular maintenance becomes a challenge, and once the developer has packed up and gone, it is the block manager and the tenants who inherit the problem.

So what can be done? The answer is in the hands of developers and their architects. By identifying lighting consultants that have experience in maintaining block lighting at feasibility stage, before design and installation, many problems faced by property managers and their clients could be avoided. Considerable money and energy could be saved, and the lighting that looks so enticing to new residents would be just as efficient many years later.

With the trend for developers such as [EcoWorld Ballymore](#) at London's Warden scheme to retain the management of blocks in house, we could begin to see a different approach to specification. If this is the case, it would be a positive move towards saving tenants money, as well as ensuring that the enormous amount of energy expended on lighting new schemes is not being wasted.

How many does it take to change a light bulb?

In the average block of flats, it costs around ?45 to change a simple lamp. The lamp itself may not be that expensive to replace, but consider what is involved in the process of getting an engineer on to the site:

- the tenant or site manager calls the property manager to report bulb failure;
- the property manager logs a report;
- the property manager instructs a company to repair;
- the company logs the task and schedules an engineer;
- the engineer repairs the fault;
- the engineer reports to the company;
- the company raises an invoice to the property manager;
- the property manager logs the invoice; and
- the property manager records the cost against the account for the block.

When an existing lighting system has come to the end of its useful life, commissioning a new, low-energy alternative will ultimately save both you as the property manager and your leaseholders time and money and cut wasted energy.

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Further information

- Related competencies include [Housing maintenance, repair and improvements](#) and [Property management](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Property journal* (March/April 2017)