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Keys and Locks

Modern access control systems govern the accessibility in many ways using computerised systems, keypads, card swipes and even biometric controls. However every building still comes with a large number of traditional mechanical keys and locks. A named individual should have responsibility for procedures for key control with procedures in place relating to the ordering, issuing, maintenance and auditing of locks and keys. These must record key and lock numbers, and control and record the allocation of keys and their safe storage while not in use. Where keys are held centrally there should be a process in place for the “signing out” of keys to authorised personnel.

Keys are inexpensive and convenient but often easy to copy. Security can be improved by using locks with keys that are available only from the manufacturer. Even so, security is permanently compromised if a key is lost or stolen. In these circumstances the lock, or the barrel of the lock must be changed. Some locks offer the convenient attribute of 'suiting', whereby different levels of access can be allocated without the need for several keys. Suiting allows some keys to open only a single lock, whilst other Master keys will open all the locks in a particular building, department or floor. Master and Grand Master keys should never be issued for general use and should be to be stored in a purpose-built secure key cupboard for emergency use only.

The effectiveness of any lock is determined by the strength of its components, the strength of its connection to the building or room it is designed to protect, the complexity of the device and the control of access to the key.

Pin-tumbler Rim Locks are available at low cost but are not highly secure due to their surface mounting. They can provide an economical means of ensuring privacy when used on internal doors but they are not recommended for external doors. Mortise locks are fixed within the structure of the door, overcoming the major weakness of rim locks. Their resistance to 'picking' is determined by the number of internal levers, five lever locks being the most secure. Locks with fewer levers should not be used on external doors. A five-lever mortise lock will provide good security if it is installed in a solid door with a strong, securely fixed frame, preferably constructed of metal.

*Advice on suitable keys and locks may be sought from your local Police Crime Prevention Officer, The Master Locksmiths Association (MLA) or the Association of British Insurers (ABI)
The British Standard for locks is BS 3621: 1998 'Specification for Thief Resistant Locks'.*