

PREPARING FOR ONSET OF WINTER

Keeping tenant satisfied is one thing. Timely advice can save repair bills and protect your investment. **By Louise Richardson**

THE BALMY DAYS OF SUMMER ARE

fast becoming memories and cooler weather is just around the corner. It makes sense to act now and tidy rental properties, protecting your investment and ensuring your tenants are well set-up for a comfortable, dry winter.

Resene's Karen Warman suggests starting with the exterior, fixing rotten timber, and then painting to seal it. "Now's also a good time to wash down paths and decks, where the risk of slipping increases during winter months," Warman says.

"Make sure they're extra safe by repainting with Resene Non-Skid Deck and Path. It has a lightly textured finish designed to improve grip."

Ventilation is also on Warman's winter preparation radar.

"If bathrooms were steamy over summer, in winter they will be dripping. Wet bathrooms lead to moisture issues, so make sure you have a good ventilation system in place.

"Inside, and out, treat moss and mould now and remember that washing it off doesn't work. You need to actually kill it, using Resene Moss and Mould Killer."

Auckland property manager Jacqui Everett has found an effective way of tackling ventilation issues; installing security latches to make tenants feel comfortable leaving windows open during the day to let fresh air circulate. "It really works," she says. "Once you explain it to them, they get the idea. Often it's just a case of education.

"The other thing I suggest to landlords is getting the bathroom extractor fan wired

into the light switch. That way tenants won't forget to use it."

Everett has the chimneys and fireplaces cleaned in all her properties each March.

"Many people don't know that if you fail to do this – and get the certificate to prove it – your insurance may be invalid," Everett says. She is a fan of the new make of smoke alarm, featuring 10-year long-life batteries.

She knows many landlords have problems with tenants removing smoke alarm batteries to use in their TV remotes.

"If it's a real issue in a particular property, it's now possible to get smoke alarms that are hard-wired in."

On insulation, Everett advises landlords to ask if their tenants have Community Services Cards. "If they do, you can have the house insulated for nothing. But again,



If tenants have Community Services Cards, the landlord can have the house insulated for free. **Right:** Fix rotting timber before painting exteriors.



Tackle ventilation issues before they cause a problem. Extractor fans wired to the light switch circulate fresh air when the light turns on.

it's surprising how many property owners don't know this!"

In Invercargill, landlord Margaret Lockett always pays special attention to trimming unruly trees and cleaning out spouting and downpipes in the lead-up to winter.

"It can get cold and wet down here so I like to make sure my tenants are comfortable and that my properties are secure and not deteriorating due to weather conditions," Lockett says.

"My houses are insulated at the top and the bottom. I think that's really important."

Climbing on the roof in winter isn't an ideal occupation for either you or a tradesman so autumn is also a good time to make sure your rental's roof is sound and doesn't have holes or missing tiles that may let in water.



INTERNAL GUTTERING CAN CAUSE A HUGE AMOUNT OF DAMAGE IN ROOF AREAS, SO IF A HOUSE HAS THIS SYSTEM, CHECK IT OUT VERY CAREFULLY.

JACQUI EVERETT



If there's a water problem or broken spouting that has been causing leaks for some time, insurers won't pay up.

Seal gaps around windows to prevent drafts.



WINTER TASKS IN A NUTSHELL

- ✓ Check roofs and walls for damage and water-tightness.
- ✓ Install heat pumps if needed.
- ✓ Consider an air-flow system where damp is a problem.
- ✓ Top up older insulation that has become compacted.
- ✓ Seal draughts with rubber strips or pumping foam.
- ✓ Attach window security latches.
- ✓ Install extractor fans in kitchens as well as bathrooms.
- ✓ Insulate hot water cylinders to save energy.
- ✓ Inspect light fittings, power sockets, ensuring they're safe to use.
- ✓ Educate tenants in the correct use of smoke alarms.
- ✓ Repair leaky taps and reseal around basins, baths and shower boxes.
- ✓ Clean outdoor surfaces, cut back vegetation, clean gutters and downpipes.

Jacqui Everett has another piece of advice around this: "Internal guttering can cause a huge amount of damage in roof areas, so if a house has this system, check it out very carefully."

Pauline Beissel, of the Manawatu region, has owned investment properties for 30 years. "I think I've learned a thing or two along the way!" Beissel says. Each year she follows a set routine to ready her rentals for cold weather, starting with a thorough property inspection.

"I waterblast them, clean the spouting, spray the lawns and clean moss off concrete paths and driveways," she says. "It's important to me that they look good from the street, too, so I even do the footpath outside the gate."

"We always cut trees back, especially if they're close to the house, because they can cause major damage to the structure. Always pick up the leaves that fall in autumn, because bugs can accumulate if you don't."

Beissel's trailer tends to fill, but she likes it that way. "It shows that we take our business seriously."

Indoors, a similarly rigorous system sees her checking such small details as curtain hooks, light bulbs, cupboard interiors, cleaning mouldy curtains and ensuring none of the windows are cracked.

She, too, is scrupulous about cleaning chimneys in homes with open fires and in other cases, making sure the main heat source is well-maintained and in good working condition.

"If something needs doing, I like to get on to it straight away," she says.

Beissel also emphasises the value of educating her tenants.

"They need to understand that things like ventilating the bathroom, leaving the batteries in smoke alarms and pulling curtains to keep rooms warm at night are in their own best interests."

"We've been very lucky and most of our tenants are good

and conscientious."

Mark Trafford, at Maintain to Profit, always notices a surge in general maintenance work at this time of the year.

"It's definitely when you should be checking structural and drainage issues and paying special attention to roofs," Trafford says.

Railings and steps, decks and balconies can be especially vulnerable to weather damage, so they're on Trafford's seasonal inspection checklist.

Trafford also advises reviewing insurance policies before the onset of bad weather.

"It's important to know exactly what is and isn't covered," he says.

"We often have cases of landlords finding themselves with bills for thousands of dollars because their roof has clearly been leaking for a long time and their insurance company decides it was deferred maintenance and won't pay up."

Safety and security are other issues that concern Trafford.

"Outdoor lighting is a must if you want to avoid your tenants having nasty accidents on dark winter evenings or icy early mornings."

"Make sure all your latches, locks and handles are in good working order."

Lynn Mott at On To It Group, which provides a regular home maintenance service, says leaky pipes under a house are a

common problem.

"It's surprising how often this happens without the owner realising and it can be difficult and expensive to repair," Mott says.

She acknowledges getting under a house can be difficult.

"But you should do so, and there might be clues elsewhere, such as water around or behind the washing machine or in the cupboard under the tub."

While many are simple common sense measures, property investment is an expensive business and successful landlords know cutting corners is ultimately going to compromise the value of their investments. ■

