



How to Handle Maintenance Issues with a Foreign Property

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Every homeowner has experienced it: that "uh-oh" moment when something in the home breaks or malfunctions. It could entail small home maintenance costs, like a leaky faucet or a loose floorboard. Or it could be a larger maintenance issue, like a flooded basement or a caved-in roof. Either way, getting it fixed is a major inconvenience that takes time, costs money and causes stress.

For individuals who own foreign property, the hassle is exponentially greater. Whether the property is a vacant second home or an income property that's occupied by tenants, addressing maintenance needs is hard to do from another country - but not impossible. With the help of a [property manager](#), foreign property owners can protect and preserve the premises from around the world.

Following are five guidelines to help foreign property owners establish an efficient and effective system for addressing maintenance needs.

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— Jackie Fitzgerald, director at Homes or Houses Ltd.

1. Delegate, Don't Abdicate

Property owners should expect their property manager to receive and address all maintenance requests, 24/7 - including emergency requests in the middle of the night. "You should fully expect your property manager to take those maintenance calls, because there's nothing the [owner] can do from a distance," says Jackie Fitzgerald, director at Homes or Houses Ltd., a U.K. firm that provides property sourcing and lettings services to expatriates and foreign investors.

Delegating, however, doesn't mean abdicating one's responsibility. "When it comes to larger repairs, especially, I expect owners to be absolutely involved. I can make suggestions and lay out choices so it's easy for you to send me a one-line email that says, 'OK, go ahead,' or, 'No, I don't want to do this,' but ultimately the final decision is yours," Fitzgerald says.

2. Establish Rules

Upon hiring a property manager, property owners should consider establishing a tiered system for maintenance and repairs, based on cost. "Usually, a property management company has a number," explains Jeffrey King, co-founder of Meridian Pacific Properties, Inc., a San Diego-based company that specializes in purchasing, renovating, managing and selling out-of-state investment properties. "For example, if it's under \$200, we're just going to fix it. If it's over \$200, we're going to give you a call. If it's over \$500, we're going to get multiple bids and present them to you," King says. "That way, you're not being woken in the middle of the night for small issues."

At times when extra money is needed quickly and in the local currency, property owners can use a trusted online foreign exchange service for sending money overseas. Online foreign exchange services are often more affordable than similar money transfer services from banks, and they provide relevant resources and helpful tools that can help property owners lower their foreign exchange costs.

3. Utilize Local Contacts

Canadian investor Julie Stante owns a rental property in a seaside Italian village. To manage it, she hired a local schoolteacher who lives there, which has afforded her several advantages. Recently, for instance, torrential downpours caused her property's roof to leak. "The property manager rang the roofer who did the roof, and he came out and fixed it right away - and there was no charge," Stante recalls. She says having a local ambassador who knows the local [language](#), [customs](#) and [contractors](#) keeps foreign investors from being taken advantage of.

Although personal relationships are valuable, contractors and property managers should be independent from one another. "Make sure your property management company works with tradesmen who have no vested interest in saying work is necessary when it's not," Fitzgerald says.

4. Request Documentation

For large repairs, especially, property owners should request evidence of both the problem and the solution, including written bids from contractors and, where appropriate, before and after photos. "If a property has a problem with a central heating boiler, for instance, a qualified gas-registered engineer should put in writing exactly what's required," Fitzgerald says.

If the bids are in a foreign currency, property owners can use an online currency converter to determine the cost in their [local currency](#).

5. Expect Regular Inspections

Property managers should routinely inspect a foreign property for the purpose of repairing damage and addressing preventive maintenance issues. "Twice a year you need a full physical inspection," says King, whose company inspects its properties going into summer, then again going into winter. "It's so important. I can't tell you how many times a house looks great on the outside but has been chewed up on the inside, and the poor owner doesn't know about it until two years later when the tenant moves out and leaves \$5,000 worth of damage."

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