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What you need to know

Guidance: what you need to know – working at height

Connect looks at the issue of working at height and asks what's classed as 'working from height' and how it can be avoided, or even eliminated.

Headlines

- Falls from height continue to be the most common kind of fatal accident in the UK workplace. HSE figures for 2007/08 show that 55 workers (32 employees and 23 self-employed) died following a fall from height
- This represents one quarter of all workplace deaths (excluding deaths on the road, which are reported separately)
- The worst industry is still **construction**, with 33 of the 55 deaths (60 per cent)
- A further 3,660 people were seriously injured by falls from height in 2007/08 for **employed** and **self-employed**. Major injuries included fractured skulls and broken legs. More than half of these injuries were to people working in the service sector, with transport, retail and office workers accounting for over 1,000 major injuries
- You don't have to **fall from a great height to be hurt**. Six of the 55 deaths and nearly 70 per cent of the major injuries were from a fall below head height.

How high is high?

The **Construction (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1996** made a distinction between work below or above two metres, with different risk control measures required. Although these were revoked by the 2007 Construction (Design and Management) Regulations, some sources still make this distinction.

However, the Work at Height Regulations 2005 (regulation 2(1)) define work at height as:

- (a) "work in any place, including a place at or below ground level"
- (b) "obtaining access to, or egress from, such place while at work, except by a staircase in a permanent workplace, where...a person could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury."

In other words, as people can have major accidents falling from the bottom rung of a ladder, any movement away from the floor should be considered as work at height.

Who works at height?

Anyone. It's not just window cleaners, roof workers and tree surgeons. Office workers, teachers and librarians may need to reach a book on a high shelf or catering staff may need to reach a high cupboard to store kitchen equipment or access ingredients.

What are the key regulations?

The key regulation concerning working at height is the **Work at Height Regulations 2005**. The **Work at Height (Amendment) Regulations 2007** also applies to those who provide instruction or leadership in caving or climbing for sport, recreation, team building or similar activities.

Regulations 6, 7 and 8 of the Construction (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1996 state requirements for **preventing falls and falling objects** backed up by requirements in the schedules on **guardrails, working platforms, personal suspension equipment, arresting falls** and **ladders**.

Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992 may need to be consulted, for example when considering the non-slip nature of

protective footwear and when assessing harnesses needed to work at height.

[Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998](#) have been used to prosecute companies for accidents at height. See, for example, the breach following the [collapse of a scaffold board](#).

Main principles

Eliminate: [Regulation 6 \(2\) of the Work at Height Regulations 2005](#) states that "Every employer shall ensure that work is not carried out at height where it is reasonably practicable to carry out the work safely otherwise than at height." In other words, don't do the job at height if you can do it on the ground.

Prevent: Is there an existing safe place of work from which the task can be carried out? If there's no existing safe place of work, create one using temporary guard rails around a roof, or by providing a correctly constructed scaffold.

Reduce distance and consequences: Regulation 6 (5ai) of the 2005 regulations requires every employer, so far as is reasonably practicable, to provide sufficient work equipment to minimise the distance and consequences. The distance that a person can fall can be reduced with safety nets or fall arrest systems. An airbag can reduce the consequences of a fall.

For both **prevention** and **reduction**, collective measures (such as guardrails and safety nets) should be considered before individual measures (such as personal fall restraints).

Reduce time spent at height: You can also reduce the number of times you need to work at height. For example, long-life light bulbs need replacing less often. Co-ordination of maintenance needs can combine several small maintenance jobs where it might feel "practicable" to use a ladder into one larger maintenance job which makes it worth erecting a scaffold tower. Some organisations change all fluorescent lighting tubes on a regular schedule, rather than waiting for each one to fail.

Training and instruction: [Regulation 5 of the 2005](#) regulations states "Every employer shall ensure that no person engages in any activity, including organisation, planning and supervision, in relation to work at height or work equipment for use in such work unless he is competent to do so or, if being trained, is being supervised by a competent person."

The HSE interpretation of this is that ladders can be used, but only when workers have the competence to decide if the ladder is appropriate for the job (i.e. of short duration and low risk) and know how to check it and use it correctly. The ladder must also be maintained and inspected appropriately. The HSE recommends that unless a ladder is used only infrequently (once a month or less) and only for light work (typically less than 95kg combined weight of user and equipment), ladders used at work should be Class 1 (as defined by BS 1129: 1990 or BS 2037: 1994) or conform with BS EN 131 (2007).

How can I eliminate or avoid work at height?

Some examples of how work at height can be eliminated:

- Many window cleaners have moved to systems which enable them to reach first storey windows with poles, while standing on the ground, rather than climbing a ladder or using more expensive equipment.
- In the theatre, rather than using ladders to climb up to lighting rigs to change bulbs or filters, lighting rigs can be installed that can be lowered to the ground by a pulley.
- Provide storage that allows teachers to access text books, or kitchen staff to store saucepans without needing to leave the floor.

There are further examples in the "avoid" section of the [HSE work at height video](#).

Checklist

If you've decided that you can't eliminate working at height and that some equipment needs to be used to provide a safe place of work, consider the following:

- How high up (or low down) is the work?
- How much movement is needed horizontally and vertically during the work?
- How long will the job take?
- Does the job involve:

- Carrying heavy or awkward loads?
- Stretching or reaching?
- What's the terrain on which the work equipment will stand? Is it:
 - Dry or muddy?
 - Flat or uneven?
 - Clear, or covered in gravel or debris?
 Are there any obstacles that the work equipment must straddle or avoid?
- Are there any access issues, for example does the equipment need to be moved through any doorways or into lifts?

And importantly:

- Do you have people who are qualified and competent to erect, use and dismantle the equipment safely?

Links

- Statistics used in this article are from the "[Kind of Industry](#)" tables at
- Another useful set of statistics is within "[Statistics of workplace fatalities and injuries: Falls from height](#)". This is undated, but uses HSE 2007/08 provisional figures and hence may be slightly different from those quoted in the headlines.
- HSE "[Falls from height](#)" area includes some useful illustrations of [unusable ladders](#) and [good practice in use of ladders](#).
- HSE also have a section on their website dedicated to [falls from vehicles](#).
- HSE have a range of free leaflets on [falls from height](#).
- Some of the HSE industry areas have their own area on falls from height – for example, [construction](#), [road haulage](#), [agriculture](#) and [food manufacture](#). There is also advice for [teachers and classroom assistants](#).
- The "[Shattered Lives](#)" campaign website provides examples of falls and how they could be avoided within [construction](#) and [building maintenance](#).
- HSE video "[Work at height building maintenance](#)" illustrates alternatives to working at height, and shows how equipment should be selected and used.
- Details of breaches of the Work at Height regulations can be found on the [HSE Prosecutions database](#).
- Further useful HSE downloads are [listed](#) including the Glass and Glazing Federation code of practice "[Working at Heights in the Domestic Replacement Window Industry](#)" and the [HSE Topic inspection pack for Falls from Height \(January 2007\)](#).
- [RRC podcasts](#) on "Falls from Vehicles" (April 2008); "Slips" (Jan 2008) and "Working at height" (Sept 2007) (you have to register free to access them).
- [Work at Height Safety Association](#)
- [Useful set of illustrations of work at height](#).
- [The Access Industry Forum](#) can also be a source of help and information around working at height issues.

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