

Working at Height

Falls are the single biggest cause of workplace deaths and the second most common cause of major injuries, but falls can be prevented by careful management of work at height.

Nature of the Problem

All industry sectors are exposed to the risks presented by work at height although the incidence varies considerably.

There are two main categories of fall:

- High falls (over 2m) mainly from ladders and roofs which occur most frequently in Agriculture and Construction
- Low falls (less than 2m and not including slips or trips at ground level) mainly from ladders and scaffolds which are more common in the Manufacturing and Service sectors

Common Factors

Most accidents involving falls could have been prevented if the right equipment had been provided, if it had been adequately maintained and was properly used. But experience shows that as many falls arise due to poor management as are caused by equipment failure.

Key faults include a failure:

- to recognise a problem
- to ensure that safe systems of work are followed
- to provide safe systems of work
- to supply adequate information, instruction, training or supervision provided
- to ensure use equipment supplied
- to provide safe plant/equipment

However, the best approach is to eliminate work at height if possible.

Causes

The main causes of falls are:

- Ladders primarily from moveable ladders
- Scaffolding - primarily from general access scaffolds
- Work area/platform
- Vehicles
- Roof edge
- Stairs
- Fragile roofs
- Gangways/catwalks

The most common incidents involve overreaching, over-balancing, equipment failure, misuse of equipment, unexpected movement (particularly where ladders are involved) and the failure of a fragile surface.

Legal Requirements

Work at Height Regulations (WAHR) which came into effect in April 2005 consolidated and clarified the requirements for working at height.

The basic legal requirements governing work at height are:

- Work at height be avoided where possible
- Safe systems of work be used
- Risk assessments must be carried out
- The correct equipment is used at all times
- Equipment be maintained in good order
- Adequate precautions are taken to prevent falls and falling objects

There are a number of specific points in the regulations that include the following:

- Work on fragile roofs
- Risks from falling objects
- Provision of working platforms fitted with suitable and sufficient guardrails and toe boards
- Inspection of equipment provided for work at height including scaffolds, harnesses and lanyards

WAHR also introduces two new concepts

- “Collective” safeguards: These provide protection for all workers and include precautions such as scaffolds, guardrails and toe boards, netting, roof edge protection
- “Personal fall protection systems”:
- Equipment such as harnesses and lanyards whose function and purpose is to prevent serious injury for an individual worker should a fall occur

WAHR does not ban or prohibit the use of ladders. However, it is clearly set out that ladders should be primarily viewed as a means of access, for example to a working platform. If a ladder is to be used to carry out work it must be of low risk and short duration.

Legal responsibilities

Both employers and the self-employed have a legal duty to ensure that their work activities do not put others at risk and to share information relating to any required emergency procedures and information.

Overview

- Consider whether there are other, safer ways of doing the job. Can work at height be avoided?
- Ensure that you have fully considered all of the ways in which you or your employees could be at risk of falling.
- Don't underestimate the risks involved.
- Simply 'taking care' is not enough. Proper precautions must be in place.

- Don't start work at height until you have properly planned the work and assessed and controlled the risks involved.
- Decide what equipment is required for the job. Ideally precautions should be designed to prevent a fall, for example using guard rails at a roof edge or crawling boards on a fragile roof. For some jobs it may be appropriate to use fall arrest equipment such as a safety harness and lanyard.
- If you have not got the appropriate equipment then get it. Don't take a chance with a ladder if what you should be using is a tower scaffold. Making do without the right equipment to speed up the work or minimise expense can lead to injury or death, as well as prosecution if the law is broken.
- Ensure that there are no defects in any equipment that you use.
- Make sure that equipment is used safely and that any necessary training or supervision is provided.