

Work at height: The basics

'Height Aware' campaign

Information sheet 1

This information will help you identify when you, or people you are responsible for, are working at height and the issues you need to think about.

What is work at height?

Work at height means work in any place where, if precautions were not taken, a person could fall down and injure themselves.

If you:

- work above ground level;
- could fall from an edge, through an opening or fragile surface; or
- could fall from ground level into an opening in a floor or hole in the ground;

you will be working at height, because you can fall from one level to another.

Examples of work at height include:

- using working platforms such as scaffolds, tower scaffolds, cherry pickers, scissor lifts and podium steps;
- work on a roof, piece of plant or equipment;
- using ladders or stepladders.

What precautions do you need to take?

Remember, work at height may be a one off, or routine. You will need to make sure you identify all tasks, which require work at height, so you can make sure they are carried out safely.

The key to preventing injury from work at height is to carry out a risk assessment, so you can choose the right precautions. This is a simple process, answering the following questions will help you do this.



Can you *avoid* the need to work at height in the first place?

Long-handled tools or other equipment can sometimes be used to safely carry out a task from ground level, eg a long-handled brush or roller for painting and water-fed poles with brushes for window cleaning. Think about whether it is possible to design out the need to work at height, eg could new or replacement services, such as pipes or cables, be put at ground level?

If you can't avoid the need to work at height, you must try to make sure the risk of a fall is prevented.

Can you *prevent* a fall?

You can do this by:

- using an existing place of work. This is a place that is already safe, eg a roof with permanent guard rails or a parapet around the edges; or a piece of plant or equipment that has fixed, permanent guard rails around it;



What *other additional measures* do you need to take to reduce the risk of a fall?

When using any equipment for work at height, you also need to make sure:

- the people using it are trained to use it safely;
- it is regularly inspected and well maintained; and
- the work is supervised to check people are working safely.

The normal use of ladders or step ladders does not provide measures which either prevent falls or minimise the consequences. So you must be able to show that it was not reasonable to select alternative equipment because the task is low risk and short duration.

Have you *identified* whether there are any *fragile surfaces*?

You need to be particularly aware of fragile materials when working at height as their presence in, or near the working area, increases the risk. A fragile surface is one, which would be liable to break if a person worked on it or fell onto it. Common examples include, fibre and asbestos cement roof sheets and many skylights, but could also include bridged materials in silos.

You should make sure you:

- **avoid** the need to work on or near or pass across them by, eg repairing a skylight from underneath using a tower scaffold or from above using a cherry picker;
- **prevent** a fall by using fixed walkways with guard rails to get across a fragile asbestos cement roof or use suitable working platforms with guard rails during work on or near a fragile surface;
- **minimise** the consequences of a fall by using nets, airbags or fall arrest.

- using work equipment. If you cannot use an existing place of work, consider whether you can use work equipment to prevent people falling. Tower scaffolds, podium steps, cherry pickers and scissor lifts are some common examples of work equipment, which will do this because the working platforms have guard rails. If regular access is required, eg to an air conditioning unit on a roof, it may be reasonable for the client/building owner to create a safe place of work by installing permanent guard rails to and around the work area.

If you cannot put measures in place to prevent a fall, you must try to limit the risk by minimising the distance and/or consequences of a fall.

Can you *minimise* the consequences of a fall?

You must first try to **avoid** and then **prevent** a fall before using measures that will only **minimise** or limit the consequences. Airbags and safety nets are examples of such measures, because they should minimise the risk of injury if someone falls. Fall arrest equipment will also minimise injury if someone falls, providing the equipment is set up correctly, users know how to look after it and they understand its limitations.

Want to know more?

This is one of five 'Height Aware' campaign information sheets. The others in the series are:

- Sheet 2:* Selecting equipment for work at height
- Sheet 3:* Selecting competent contractors for work at height
- Sheet 4:* Selecting, using and maintaining personal fall protection equipment
- Sheet 5:* Minor roof maintenance work: Protecting against falls

More information is available on the HSE website www.hse.gov.uk/falls and from HSE Infoline on 0845 345 0055.