

Working at height for construction workers

Infosheet for workers at height in construction

Work at height is the biggest single cause of fatal and serious injury in the construction industry, particularly on smaller projects. Over 60% of deaths during work at height involve falls ([HSE](#)):

- from ladders, scaffolds, working platforms and roof edges
- through fragile roofs or rooflights

Hazards associated with working at height in construction

Key hazards associated with work at height in construction include:

- Poor planning and organising of work-at-height activities, including a lack of or insufficient risk assessment
- Workers not being given sufficient information, training, instruction or supervision

When work at height cannot be avoided, common hazards include:

- Unprotected edges of roofs and services, including fragile roofs, unprotected openings and excavations
- Using equipment or practices not suitable for the task
- Using work at height equipment incorrectly, e.g. not in accordance with manufacturer's instructions, design or load capabilities
- The failure of equipment or anchor points
- Erection of WAH platforms and equipment on uneven or unstable ground
- Weather conditions which make surfaces more slippery or reduce visibility
- Equipment Failures
- Carrying or moving heavy loads at height
- Falling objects
- Sources of electricity
- Fatigue & Complacency

What is the issue and who is at risk?

A wide range of individuals in the construction sector are potentially exposed to risks stemming from working at height activities, depending on the nature of the project. These can include:

• Scaffold installers

These workers are often among the first and last on site. Falls can occur to them during scaffold erection and dismantling, unstable structures, incomplete platforms, lack of guardrails.

• Roofers

Stepping on fragile roof materials, exposure to unprotected edges, roof lights, and sudden weather changes.

• Plant and equipment installers

This includes specialists who install or maintain:

- HVAC (Heat Ventilation and Air Conditioning) systems
- Ducting and pipework
- Heavy plant mounted at height
- Electrical systems (lighting, power units on ceilings)

• Cranes and hoists operators

Working from ladders or MEWPs (Mobile Elevated Work Platforms), awkward postures, falls during transfers between access platforms and fixed structures.

• General construction workers

Any trade may be exposed at certain project stages:

- Carpenters (roof structures, formwork)
- Steel fixers
- Masons (working on a scaffold)
- Painters and decorators (external façades)
- Glaziers (installing windows at height)
- Window cleaners
- Maintenance crew

• Building Inspectors & Surveyors

Often required to access difficult-to-reach parts of buildings, sometimes on temporary structures.

Other measures to consider in conjunction with other risk control measures:

- Training and toolbox talks, e.g. ladders, tower scaffold erection, use of mobile elevated working platforms.
- Warning notices, e.g. for fragile roofs.
- Making edges highly visible when physical edge protection is not practicable.
- Suitable emergency rescue procedures for a suspended person.

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Infosheet for Occupational Safety and Health professionals (OSH)

For OSH practitioners, it is imperative to have an active role during the working at height risk management process, from conducting the required risk assessment, to conducting regular workplace safety audits, forming toolbox talks, and conducting the investigation of accident or near-misses caused by work at height activities.

OSH professionals should develop:

- Their competency in assessing risks associated with working at height, including risks related to factors such as work pressure and complacency
- Relationships with operational stakeholders, such as site managers and supervisors, to be in a position to provide ongoing support
- Their skills in influencing and negotiating with leaders, so that they can address risks related to excess pressure or unreasonable expectations

OSH professionals have a critical role to play in reducing the risk associated with working at height.

Helping to make workers feel confident in voicing concerns and making suggestions is vital – this may be through formal Health & Safety committee meetings, but informal chats about the working environment are just as important.

When incidents do occur, the OSH professional has a responsibility to investigate all the contributing factors, including aspects such as pressure to work quickly.

Making use of the insights they gather and ensuring changes are made is a fundamental part of their role.

Fact box

- While some workplace injuries are declining, falls from height are not. They remain the leading cause of workplace fatalities and injuries in the UK, accounting for an alarming 36% of all deaths in 2023/24.
- Since 2013, workers in the US construction industry have suffered over 300 fatal and 20,000 nonfatal fall-related injuries every year. In 2023 alone, 421 of the 1075 fatalities in construction were due to falls from height.

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For workers, it is imperative to:

- Ensuring you have the correct training and qualifications before starting a working at height activity
- Listening to and following all the received working at height instructions and protocols
- Taking care of themselves and others by acting responsibly and not putting anyone unnecessarily at risk
- Being fit for work, so well-rested and not under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Using all equipment in the correct way as per training and the manufacturer's instructions
- Reporting any health and safety concerns or problems to the relevant people and only working when it is safe to do so

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5 golden rules for working at height in construction

1. Design for working at height safety first
- Build safety into every design, from concept to completion.
2. Plan every height task - No work at height without clear planning and risk assessment.
3. Equip and train right - Always use the right tools, platforms, and make sure your training is up to date.
4. Inspect, Verify, Maintain - Constantly check structures, platforms, and equipment.
5. Respect weather conditions - Stop and reassess when weather introduces new hazards

Further resources
[IOSH Introduction to Working at Height](#)
[IOSH Introduction to risk assessment](#)
[Introduction to risk management](#)

Links to HSE, or other industry places
[UK Safety and health in construction \(Revised edition\)](#)
[UK Working at height](#)
[HSE Working at height - a brief guide](#)
[HSE Construction safety hazards](#)
[HSE Health and safety in construction](#)

Working at height for construction workers

Infosheet for organisations

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Actions for organisations:

- Integrate safe design early - Embed work at height considerations in the conceptual and structural design phases - ensure that all permanent works can be safely constructed, accessed, and maintained
- Conduct work at height risk assessments - Perform thorough, project-specific work at height risk assessments that account for structural integrity, functional use, weather conditions, workloads, and installation methods.
- Plan and provide for safe access and egress - Design and implement safe working platforms, access routes, and egress systems that meet all regulatory and practical safety requirements.
- Ensure quality in erection and installation - Enforce robust inspection and quality assurance processes to verify that structural elements are correctly installed and can safely support intended loads.
- Promote competence and correct use - Train all personnel in the correct use of equipment and systems, ensuring that equipment is used only for its intended purpose and in accordance with the plan.
- Acknowledge that risks remain even when controls are in place – Personal accountability, commitment to safe behaviour, and vigilance are always required

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