WORKING AT HEIGHT RISK ASSESSMENT

Background Information

Falls from height are the biggest single cause of fatal accidents and the second biggest cause of major injuries. However, this type of injury is not only found on construction sites; only 40% of injuries are from falls from over 2 metres.

The Working from Height Regulations 2004 follow on from previous construction-centred legislation that made a requirement to prevent falls from over two metres – these new regulations have no minimum fall distance, and would cover someone standing on a book to reach something alongside much higher potential falls. The only area it does not cover is slips, trips and falls from the same level or permanent stairs, and those areas covered specifically by other legislation.

Risk Factors

(For useful advice, look in this manual at section 4.73 Manual Handling Risk Factors which describes how undertakings should always be considered by the task, the individual, the location and the environment).

In brief, the right equipment must be provided and used for the right job. This applies for every situation from reaching for something in the office, to working with ladders or work platforms or even rope access working.

Books or chairs must never be used to reach anything – most people at some point have fallen off a chair and using one to stand on presents a very real danger of serious injury. It is a ridiculous event when somebody ends up having a nasty sprain, break or contusion just trying to cut corners and save a few seconds in getting a suitable step ladder; it is costly to the individual concerned and their employer.

In terms of ladders and access scaffolds, the Health and Safety Executive provides the following:

“Work at height should be carried out from a platform with suitable edge protection. Occasionally this may not be possible and a ladder may have to be used. However, ladders are best used as a means of getting to a workplace. They should only be used as a workplace for light work or short duration.

When selecting what equipment to use think about what the job includes, how long it will last and where it needs to be done. It is tempting to use a ladder for all sorts of work but you should always consider a working platform first, for example, a properly erected mobile scaffold tower or a mobile elevated working platform (MEWP).”

It goes on to say that jobs dealing with guttering, windows or painting should usually be carried out from scaffolds or mobile access equipment.
Often it is when the risks are most obvious that the most care is taken. It should be remembered that sometimes falling from 2 feet does more injury than falling from 10 feet.

Finances should not be considered a factor; staff should not feel they must use a ladder because a working platform would be too expensive – cutting corners can lead to much higher costs.

Some Practical Guidance for Working at Height

- Don’t stand on chairs!
- All properties should issue guidance on best practice on issues of working at height and should make suitable information, instruction and training a priority.
- Many working at height tasks can be thought of in a similar way to manual handling tasks. As many people have manual handling training, it should be straightforward to introduce working from height operations risk assessments and safe systems of work.
- Always use the TILE system of Task, Individual, Load and Environment when considering everyday working at height operations.
- Staff who feel unable to perform a task should ask for assistance, and should not be belittled for doing so; ‘macho’ behaviour is an unacceptable cause of many injuries – pride does come before a fall!
- Ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that any surface, parapet, railing, work equipment, working platform or rope access equipment at every place of work at height is checked on each occasion before it is used.
- Kick steps are suitable if little stretching is required, the individual is able to easily use it, it is located on flat ground with good grip and it is in a location where it doesn’t become a hazard itself.
- Step ladders provide much better access than kick steps, as they give the user something to support themselves on with their hand.
- All equipment such as step ladders must be kept where they can be easily used; a person in an office is unlikely to go to the other end of the property to find one, and carrying one for example up or down stairs can create other hazards.
- Ladders must be kept in a secure area, or locked down, so they can not be used by unauthorised persons to gain access (i.e. burglary).
- Never create working at height hazards; for example, don’t make space in one area by moving heavy items, or for that matter any other objects that are also used, out of reach.
- Make written safe systems of work for any tasks considered risky by using those staff competent in the task, and competent in identifying the hazards; recognise and encourage staff to demonstrate their competence, experience, skills and professionalism in their work.
- Responsibility for safety cannot be passed fully onto contractors or other people using the property; the Society has a duty of care to all users – if a contractor is used because of an identified hazard it must be ensured that the contractor is aware of it, has assessed it and is using a safe system of work.
Managing Working At Height Operations

Whilst the Society will ensure that suitable working conditions are provided working at height operations, it is the responsibility of employees to follow agreed safe systems of work. It is the responsibility of managers to ensure that these systems are being followed.

To secure the health and safety of workers with regard to working at height operations, Managers and Responsible Persons at each property should ensure that, for work under their control:

- Working at height operations which present a risk of injury are identified
- Operations which present a risk of injury are avoided, so far as is reasonably practicable, by eliminating the need for the operation to be undertaken (e.g. putting an object within normal reaching parameters eliminates the need to use a step ladder)
- Those operations that cannot be avoided are assessed using an ergonomic approach which considers the task, the individual, the load (if applicable) and the environment, to determine the level of risk. The assessment should be recorded to show that it has taken place and to allow for easy review if circumstances change
- Measures required to eliminate the risk, or reduce it to the lowest level which is reasonably practicable, are identified from the risk assessment and are used to implement a safe system of work
- All new work which might involve working at height operations is assessed and safe systems of work are implemented (if applicable) before the work commences
- Annual reviews of assessments are made to ensure that they are still valid but reassessment is carried out immediately if any of the components of the operation have changed
- Incidents which result in injury to any user of the property are fully investigated and relevant risk assessments and systems of work are reviewed immediately
- Suitable information, training and supervision is provided for all employees engaged in working from height tasks and that such training is recorded, monitored, evaluated and reviewed
- Sufficient information about working at height hazards is given, and received, from other employers who have control of workers (to include contractors, and self employed contractors) on Society properties.

Risk Assessment/ Safe System of Work

The risk assessment for manual handling operations can be produced using the standard template for risk assessment. It must be reviewed annually, or when major changes occur (new buildings, changes in staff). Where specific hazardous operations are identified, a written ‘safe system of work’ should be produced.

The aim of risk assessment is to evaluate hazards associated with particular tasks and to identify the likelihood of injury; then to identify control measures which can be implemented to remove or reduce the risk (this may include training). For varied work (such as maintenance) it will not be possible to assess every single instance of working
from height operations. In these circumstances, each type or category of operation should be identified and the associated risk assessed.

Risk assessment do not need to be recorded if the operation in question is straightforward and of low risk, will be of very short duration and the time taken to record it would be disproportionate.

Before beginning an assessment, the views of employees and volunteers can be of particular use in identifying working at height problems. Involvement in the assessment process should be encouraged, to establish solutions with specific tasks. Forcing methods and practices on employees will make them far less likely to follow instructions, and may lead to additional hazards.

As identified above, safe systems of work are reports, created in response to particular hazards, or category of hazards. The person creating the report must be competent in understanding the task and the hazards associated with it.

A safe system of work should include

- Who will be involved in the task
- Who may be affected by the task (public, other staff, etc.)
- The location of the task
- When the task will be taking place
- A description of any work equipment or work platform required
- Details of any matter posing a health and safety risk
- How specific risks will be controlled
- Details of any further action necessary
- The name and position of the person making the report