Health and Safety Services

UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH
Part of London and South East University Group

WORKING AT HEIGHT Guidance

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1. Overview

Falls from height remain the leading cause of fatal workplace injuries and a significant contributor to serious injuries in the workplace. In 2023/24, there were 50 fatal injuries due to falls from height in Great Britain, an increase from 35 in 2017/18. Falls from height accounted for 36% of all workplace fatalities.

While specific data on major injuries resulting from falls from height is unavailable for this period, falls remain a major workplace hazard. In 2023/24, 604,000 workers reported a non-fatal workplace injury, with falls contributing significantly to this total.

2. Definitions

"Work at Height" - Work at height is any place where a person could fall from one level to another and suffer an injury if no precautions were taken.

You are working at height if you:

- Work above ground or floor level.
- Could fall from an edge, opening, or fragile surface.
- Could fall from ground level into an opening, such as a hole in the floor.

Work at height does not include slips or trips on the same level, as it specifically refers to falls from one level to a lower level. It also does not apply to walking up or down a permanent staircase within a building.

3. The Work at Height Regulations 2005

The Work at Height Regulations 2005 apply to all activities where there is a risk of falling from height that could result in personal injury. These regulations apply regardless of the equipment used, the duration of the task, or the height at which the work takes place.

Examples where these Regulations Apply:

- Using ladders, stepladders, or kick stools.
- Working on scaffolding or mobile elevated work platforms (MEWPs).
- Performing tasks on the back of a lorry, such as securing or sheeting a load
- Climbing permanent structures (gantries, telegraph poles).
- Tree work, arboriculture, or forestry operations.
- Working near excavations or open cellar spaces.
- Rope access, cradles, or work on fragile surfaces.
- Stage or set construction (e.g., theatre, film, or TV production).

3.1. What Do the Regulations Require?

When there is a risk of falling that could result in injury, employers or those responsible for managing work at height must ensure that:

- Work is properly planned and organised, considering factors such as weather conditions and potential emergencies.
- Only competent individuals carry out or supervise work at height.
- A thorough risk assessment is conducted, following the hierarchy of control—avoid, prevent, and mitigate risks, with priority given to collective protection measures.
- All equipment used for work at height is suitable, correctly used, regularly inspected, and well-maintained.

3.2. Employee Responsibilities

In addition to the employer's duties, individuals performing work at height (including employees and self-employed workers) must:

- Report any hazards, unsafe conditions, or equipment defects to their supervisor or manager.
- Use all safety equipment and devices as instructed and in line with their training and instructions given.

4. Guidance

The guidance below outlines the key principles and best practices for working at height and provides essential information on planning, assessing, and implementing control measures to minimise risks and ensure compliance with safety regulations. This includes practical steps for avoiding unnecessary work at height, preventing falls, and mitigating the consequences of any remaining risks.

4.1. Safe Work Planning

Proper planning is essential for safe work at height. Employers or those responsible for managing work at height must follow these three key steps to ensure compliance:

- Eliminate the need to work at height whenever possible. Many tasks can be safely performed from the ground with careful planning.
- If working at height is unavoidable, implement fall prevention measures. Use collective protection such as guardrails, scaffolds, or secure platforms to prevent falls.
- Where a risk of falling remains, steps should be taken to mitigate its impact. These include applying fall-arrest systems, harnesses, safety nets, or airbags to reduce injury severity.

4.2. Risk Assessments

A risk assessment is essential for the effective planning and safe execution of all work at height. Risk assessments must be conducted before any work begins to identify hazards, evaluate risks, and determine the most appropriate safety measures and equipment.

When selecting control measures to prevent falls or reduce their impact, collective protection should always take precedence over personal protection where possible.

- Collective protection operates automatically without requiring individual action. Examples include permanent or temporary guardrails, scissor lifts, and tower scaffolds.
- Personal protection relies on the worker's correct usage to be effective. This includes safety harnesses and energy-absorbing lanyards, which must be securely attached to an appropriate anchor point.

Note: The Work at Height Regulations 2005 do **NOT** ban ladders or stepladders, but their use should be limited to situations where:

- The task is low risk and short duration (typically no longer than 30 minutes).
- No other safer alternative is practical.
- The ladder or stepladder is of the correct type, in good condition, and securely positioned.

4.3. Competence

Employers must ensure that no individual engages in any work at height activity including planning, organising, or supervising unless they are competent to do so. If a worker is still in training, they must be closely supervised by a competent person.

Competence is a combination of appropriate skills, knowledge, training and experience, which collectively should enable a person to:

- Safely perform their assigned work at height activities within their level of responsibility.
- Recognise potential hazards and risks associated with work at height, including those related to tasks and equipment.
- Identify defects or omissions in health and safety measures and recommend appropriate corrective actions that may be required.

The competency of all staff involved in work at height should be regularly assessed, and additional training provided where necessary. This applies to workers who physically perform tasks at height and supervisors and planners responsible for overseeing work at height. Specific training should continue to be provided for the selection and safe use of equipment for work at height, such as ladders and tower scaffolds.

4.4. Contractor Requirements

All contractors conducting work at height must provide:

- Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) that align with regulatory requirements and industry ‘best practices’.
- Evidence of training and competency for workers carrying out tasks at height.

If risk assessment and method statements (RAMS) indicate a high risk of falling, such as: scaffolding assembly or work on fragile surfaces, use of towers, cranes, or abseiling techniques and work at height with no edge protection, a permit to work must be obtained from the Campus Estates Office before the work begins.

4.5. Equipment Safety

All work at height equipment must be regularly inspected, tested, and maintained by a competent individual in line with legal requirements and industry best practices.

Before starting any task, users must visually inspect ladders and stepladders to check for:

- Missing screws, bolts, or rivets – Ensure all fixings are intact and secure.
- Bent, cracked, or missing rungs – Look for structural damage that could compromise stability.
- Painted rungs – Paint can obscure defects, making it harder to spot damage.
- Missing or damaged feet – Worn or missing rubber feet can cause ladders to slip.

Note: Any defective equipment must be removed from use immediately and reported for maintenance or replacement.

For additional details on safe ladder use, refer to the University Guidance on the Use of Ladders and Step Ladders

5. Further information

5.1. Related HSE Guidance:

Further general guidance on Working at Height can be found on Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Work at Height

5.2. Related University documents:

- Health and Safety Policy
- University of Greenwich Working at Height - Ladders and Stepladders

5.3. Other related guidance:

- HSE-Work at Height

6. Document History

This document will be reviewed at least annually.

Review Date	Reviewer	Summary of Review
16 -June -25	Michelle Owusua Appiah-Agyekum Health and Safety Advisor	Updated to include new data on working at height injuries and other relevant guidance.
29-10-26	Chantelle Marriott Health & Safety Advisor	Updated with new LASE logo and revision number