UNISON HEALTH & SAFETY **Information** sheet

• *Working at Height*

Last amended September 2013

Falls whilst working at height remain one of the biggest causes of fatalities and major injuries from "accidents" at work. On average 50 people die each year in Great Britain (Health and Safety Executive (HSE) statistic) as a result of a fall from height, and almost 9,000 are seriously injured. When you do a task that involves a risk of falling liable to cause personal injury, you are working at height. So this can include falling from the ground into a pit or other opening in the floor, or from an edge or through a fragile surface. You do not have to be very high to fall and injure yourself. Tasks at height include anything from filing on high shelves using a step to cleaning high windows on an elevated platform.

The Working at Height Regulations 2005 aim to prevent falls in the workplace and keep workers safe. Your employer must prevent you doing unnecessary work at height. Using equipment or adjusting the task may mean that working at height is not necessary.

1. Work at height must be avoided where possible, for example by using equipment so the work can be done from ground level (such as an extendable pole when window cleaning).
2. Where work at height is not avoidable, then work equipment or other measures must be used to prevent falls (such as a permanent barrier).
3. Where the risk of falling cannot be eliminated, then work equipment or other measures must be used to minimise the distance and consequence of potential falls (such as a safety harness).

If working at height is unavoidable, your employer must do a thorough risk assessment (see the further resources section below) and provide suitable equipment and adequate training.

If working at height cannot be avoided your employer must:

- assess all the risks – conduct a risk assessment;
- properly plan, organise, and appropriately supervise the work thoroughly and ensure it is carried out in a safe manner;
- ensure those involved in the work (including the planning, organising, supervising, and carrying out of the work) are competent - this means that they have the skills, knowledge, and experience to do the job or are supervised by a competent person if they are being trained;
- make sure the working area is safe and so far as possible includes features to prevent a fall (such as a railing or barrier);
- provide suitable measures such as using an existing safe place of work (possibly a non-fragile roof with a permanent perimeter guardrail) or a safe means of access to prevent a fall. If preventing a fall by doing the work from a safe place is not possible, then provide suitable

equipment to prevent falls and appropriate equipment for the work involved - and ensure they are used. When choosing suitable and appropriate equipment, preference should be given to collective systems which protect many (such as a physical barrier, guard rail, or working platform) above personal systems which protect the individual (such as a harness);
- where a risk of falling remains, use work equipment or other measures to minimise the distance and consequence of any fall if possible, and if not possible to minimise the distance then to minimise the consequences of the fall, and provide additional training and/or instruction to prevent the risk of falling;
- inspect and maintain work and safety equipment as appropriate and the place of work at height on each use;
- except for members of an emergency service acting in an emergency, only allow working at height when weather conditions mean it safe to do so;
- prevent where possible or otherwise minimise risks posed by fragile surfaces (such as roofs) or falling objects (including not working on or near or passing across fragile surfaces if possible, or otherwise displaying prominent signs);
- create a plan for dealing with emergencies and for rescues.

If working at height, an employee must use the equipment supplied (including safety devices) properly and follow any training and instructions unless they think this would be unsafe (in which case they should seek further instruction). Employees must also report any safety hazards (activity or defect) to their employer.

Ladders and stepladders

A significant number of all reported fall-from-height incidents involve ladders and stepladders – on average this accounts for 14 deaths and 1,200 major injuries to workers each year in Great Britain (HSE statistic). Many of these injuries are caused by inappropriate or incorrect use of the equipment.

Ladders and stepladders may be used for work at height, but only if a risk assessment shows that it is low risk, is for a short duration (up to 30 minutes in one position) and can be used safely. Ladders or stepladders should only be used for work that is not heavy or strenuous. They must be secured in place, where practical by tying both stiles to a suitable point. Where this is not practical, the HSE advises that using a ladder supplemented with an effective ladder stability device (such as outriggers) should be considered. Where this is not possible, then the ladder should be securely wedged, against a wall for example. As a last resort, the ladder should be footed by someone else – but only if none of the above can be achieved. Footing must be avoided where reasonably practicable, by the use of other access equipment. The HSE also advises that employers should only buy the ladder and associated stability devices that suppliers/manufacturers can confirm will be stable enough to be used unsecured in your worse-case scenario. Otherwise employers will need to take additional measures to secure it.

If you need to carry more than 10 kg (a bucket of something) up the ladder or steps, then a detailed manual handling risk assessment should justify this. Both feet and one hand should always be in contact with the ladder whilst working, although for stepladders only, some work (if risk assessed) may be permitted without holding on.

You must not overreach or stretch when on a ladder or stepladder (the centre of your stomach should stay within the two sides of the ladder), nor must you overload it, use it unless the rungs/steps are horizontal, or work side on from a step ladder if this involves a sideways force which may tip you over (such as drilling into a hard substance). Further simple guidance on the

safe and correct use of steps and ladders is available from the HSE (see "further resources" below).

Next steps

This information sheet is intended to raise awareness of height at work, its dangers, and the measures that should be taken to ensure it is carried out safely. It is not a comprehensive guide, but simple clear advice is available, including the exact specifications for different work circumstances or equipment. For further information see the further resources section below. UNISON members with concerns should speak to their local safety rep or other branch rep.

Safety reps checklists

Work at height – summary of key issues

1. Is work at height necessary or can it be avoided (by, for example the use of equipment so the work can be done from the ground)?
2. If work at height is not avoidable, then work equipment or other measures must be used to prevent falls (such as a permanent barrier).
3. If the risk of falling cannot be eliminated, then work equipment or other measures must be used to minimise the distance and consequence of potential falls (such as a safety harness).

Before work at height is undertaken

4. Is it necessary/can it be avoided (see point 1 above)? If work at height is necessary:
    a. Has it been a risk assessed?
    b. Is it properly planned, organised, and appropriately supervised to ensure it is carried out in a safe manner?
    c. Are those involved in the work (including the planning, organising, supervising, and carrying out of the work) competent (with the appropriate skills, knowledge, and experience)?
    d. Is the proposed working area safe?
    e. If preventing a fall by doing the work from a safe place is not possible, is there equipment to prevent falls and appropriate equipment for the work involved? And are they used?
    f. If equipment is used to prevent falls, where possible, is preference given to collective systems which protect many (such as a physical barrier, guard rail, or working platform) over personal systems which protect the individual (such as a harness)?
    g. If a risk of falling still remains, are other equipment or measures used to minimise the distance and consequence of any fall if possible (such as a harness)?
    h. If not possible to minimise the distance of a fall, are other equipment or measures used to minimise the consequences of a fall (such as a net or air bags), and is additional training and/or instruction given to prevent the risk of falling?
    i. Are work and safety equipment inspected and maintained as appropriate?
    j. Is the place of work at height inspected on each use?
    k. Except for members of an emergency service acting in an emergency, is working at height only allowed when weather conditions mean it safe to do so?
    l. Are the risks from fragile surfaces (such as roofs) or falling objects prevented where possible or otherwise minimised?
    m. Is there a plan for dealing with emergencies and for rescues?

Further Resources

UNISON's *Risk Assessment – a guide for safety reps* (http://www.unison.org.uk/file/RA%20Update.pdf).

The HSE's Webpages for *Falls from Height* (http://www.hse.gov.uk/falls/index.htm) and the WAIT Toolkit (http://www.hse.gov.uk/falls/wait/wait-tool.htm) which provides assistance in choosing the right equipment for a job involving work at height.

The HSE's guide on the *Safe use of Ladders and Stepladders* (http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg402.pdf).