Working at Height: Essential Safety Measures for UK Employers

Health & Safety · Published 31 January 2026 by Integral Safety Ltd · integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/working-at-height-essential-safety-measures



Falls from height remain one of the most common causes of workplace death and serious injury in the UK. Most of these incidents are not caused by exotic or unusual tasks. They happen during ordinary jobs such as changing a light fitting, clearing guttering, accessing a roof void or working from a stepladder that was never quite the right tool for the job. Most are preventable with proper

planning, the right equipment and basic discipline in how the work is organised.

What Counts as Working at Height?

Working at height is not just about ladders and scaffolding. Legally, it means any work where a person could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury, including a fall from the same level into a hole or opening.

- Working on ladders, scaffolding, mobile elevating work platforms or towers
- Working on roofs, flat or pitched, or near unprotected edges
- Working near skylights, fragile roof lights or other fragile surfaces
- Working near excavations, pits or open floor voids, even from ground level
- Using a stepladder in an office to access a high shelf

If a fall of any distance could cause injury, the Work at Height Regulations 2005 apply. There is no minimum height threshold in the regulations themselves, so a task under two metres is not exempt.

The Work at Height Regulations 2005: Who Is a Duty Holder?

The regulations place duties on employers, the self-employed, and anyone who controls the work of others at height, to the extent of their control. That can include facilities managers and building owners. Duty holders must, in order of priority: avoid work at height where it is reasonably practicable to do so; where it cannot be avoided, use suitable work equipment or other measures to prevent a fall; and where the risk of a fall cannot be eliminated, use equipment and measures to minimise the distance and consequences of a fall should one occur.

This hierarchy is not a suggestion; it is the legal order in which control measures must be considered. A common failing picked up during audits is that businesses jump straight to personal protective equipment such as harnesses without first properly considering whether the work could be avoided altogether, for example by using a drone survey instead of sending someone onto a roof. Integral Safety's drone surveys can inspect roofs across the East Midlands, so that many visual checks need nobody to go up at all.

Planning, Supervision and Risk Assessment

Before any work at height begins, the employer or person controlling the work must ensure it is properly planned, appropriately supervised, and carried out in a way that is safe so far as is reasonably practicable. The risk assessment should be a genuine account of what could go wrong and how it is controlled, not a paperwork exercise. Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers with five or more employees must record the significant findings, and writing it down is sensible for smaller businesses too.

A compliant risk assessment for work at height should cover the specific task, not a generic template copied from elsewhere. It needs to address the condition of the structure or surface being worked on, the weather and lighting conditions likely to be encountered, the competence of the

people doing the work, the equipment being used and how it will be inspected, and what happens if someone falls, including how a rescue would actually be carried out. Risk assessments should be reviewed whenever the task, equipment, personnel or site conditions change, and periodically for recurring work. Teams in construction often treat the assessment as a live document revisited as conditions change, which is good practice in any sector.

Records to keep include the risk assessment itself, equipment inspection logs, training certificates for anyone involved, and any method statement used to brief the workforce. Keep them accessible so they can be produced on request.

Choosing the Right Equipment

Once work at height cannot be avoided, equipment should be selected with the priorities in the regulations in mind, not simply what is already in the van. The regulations require collective protection to take priority over personal protection.

- **Collective protection first**, such as guardrails, edge protection and properly designed working platforms, because these protect everyone without relying on individual behaviour
- **Personal fall protection**, such as harnesses and fall arrest or restraint systems, used where collective measures are not practicable, and only by people trained in their use and rescue
- **Ladders and stepladders**, which are justified only for low risk, short duration tasks or where existing features of the site cannot be altered

The risk assessment should explicitly justify why a ladder was chosen over a platform or tower, not just assume it.

Ladder Safety in Practice

Ladders are not banned, but they are generally appropriate only when the task is low risk and short duration, as a rough guide no more than thirty minutes at a time, and when a risk assessment supports their use. When ladders are used, they should be checked before each use for damage, positioned on firm and level ground, and secured at the top or, where that is not possible, footed or otherwise prevented from slipping. Workers should keep three points of contact wherever possible and avoid overreaching, which is one of the most common causes of ladder falls because it shifts the user's centre of gravity outside the stiles.

Ladders should also have a formal visual inspection at suitable intervals, recorded and dated, in addition to the pre-use check. Damaged ladders should be taken out of service immediately.

Competence, Training and Supervision

Anyone involved in work at height, whether doing the work, supervising it or managing the risk assessment, must be competent for their role. Competence means a combination of training, experience and knowledge, not just a certificate. For workers using specific access equipment such as towers or MEWPs, that means equipment specific training from a manufacturer or specialist provider. For managers and supervisors, understanding how to assess risk, prioritise control

measures and challenge unsafe practice is just as important, which is why many organisations send supervisors on a course such as IOSH Managing Safely to build that understanding.

Where a fall does occur, however minor, it should be properly investigated to understand what went wrong and prevent a repeat. Integral Safety's accident investigation service helps employers establish root cause rather than simply blaming the individual involved, which is rarely the full picture.

Keeping Arrangements Under Review

Work at height arrangements are not a one-off exercise. Equipment needs regular inspection and maintenance in line with the manufacturer's instructions and, for some equipment, statutory thorough examination at set intervals. Risk assessments need revisiting whenever circumstances change. Training needs refreshing as people move roles or equipment changes. A periodic audit of how work at height is managed on site, rather than how it looks on paper, is the best way to catch the gap between policy and practice before it leads to an incident. Integral Safety's auditing and inspection service is built for exactly this purpose.

If your business operates anywhere across Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire and needs an honest assessment of how work at height is managed on your sites, Integral Safety's health and safety consultants across the East Midlands can help. Integral Safety also delivers practical working at height training at your premises for staff and supervisors, so get in touch to discuss your needs.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

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This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/working-at-height-essential-safety-measures.