

Preventing falls from height in the construction industry

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Inquiry Report

The All-Party Parliamentary Group ('APPG') on Working at Height published a report in February 2019 following a 12-month inquiry investigating the common causes of falls from height in the construction industry (the Report). As well as reviewing current legislation, the Report has made four primary recommendations aiming to reduce the number of falls and help foster a wider cultural shift in the attitude to health and safety in the future.

The Health and Safety Executive reported that between April 2017 and March 2018, 35 workers were fatally injured and approximately 44,000 workers suffered non-fatal injuries from falls at height. When looking over the last five years the number of fatalities stands at 186.¹ Although it is true that the UK has some of the lowest work place fatality rates in the European Union, it is believed that many accidents and 'near misses' are not reported due to fear of prosecution, legal action, and costly insurance claims. This report highlights ways that the UK construction industry can improve to reduce this number further.

Current Legislation

The primary legislative framework for managing workplace safety is contained within The *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*. This act requires employers to ensure that workplaces provide adequate training and welfare provisions as well as a written record of their health and safety policies. The Health and Safety Executive and local authorities are responsible for ensuring the act is enforced.

¹ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/pdf/fatalinjuries.pdf>

The *Work at Height Regulations 2005* define work at height as - work in any place, including a place at or below ground level or obtaining access or egress from such place while at work, except by a staircase in a permanent workplace where, if measures required by the Regulations were not taken a person could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury. Of particular importance is Regulation 5, which states that employers should ensure that no worker should partake in any activity in relation to work at height unless they are competent to do so, or supervised by a competent person. One of the main aims of the Regulations is to dissuade working from height entirely, but it also provides practical guidance if this cannot be avoided.

Why do falls occur?

The Report discusses the common reasons for falls as:

- (i) Pressure from clients in relation to deadlines and budgets, which can have a detrimental effect on health and safety compliance on construction sites. This can lead to a mentality where 'cutting corners' is the norm, which in turn, increases the likelihood of injuries whilst working at height.
- (ii) Lack of planning, such as poor design considerations for construction, reliance on generic risk assessments or inadequate information provided at the tender stage which can mean that foreseeable health and safety risks may not be identified prior to an accident occurring.
- (iii) Lack of adequate training such as potential shortcomings in technical and regulatory training provided to managers, but also a lack of training in other skills, such as how to communicate with

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workers effectively. The Report stresses that poor supervision of workers and lack of understanding of current legislation means that falls from height are more likely.

Recommendations for the future

Four key recommendations were identified by APPG:

1. The introduction of enhanced reporting through RIDDOR, which at a minimum, records the scale of the fall, the method used, and the circumstances of the fall – this would mean that more details about incidents would be publicly available.
2. The appointment of an independent body that allows confidential, digital reporting of all near misses and smaller accidents. The data collected will be shared with government and industry to inform health and safety policy.
3. Further health and safety campaigns to raise awareness of health and safety risks of working at height to all industries.
4. The introduction of a system equivalent to Scotland's Fatal Accident Inquiry process to the whole of the UK – Section 29 of the *Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths (Scotland) Act 2016* requires ministers to report on fatalities ensuring that employers are held to account and that incidents are reported with sufficient information.

Technology

The Report also discusses how digital technology could make working at height safer in the future and possible tax relief for small, micro and sole traders to enable them to invest in new technology.

Firstly, drones could be utilised to eliminate the necessity for humans to access remote or dangerous sites, removing the risk of falls from height in high-risk construction sites such as cliffs, docks or bridges.

Secondly, virtual and augmented reality can be used in the training and education environment. This allows construction workers to fully understand the risks of working at height, whilst not having to physically be there first-hand.

Finally, off-site and modular construction methods are increasingly popular across the UK, as well as often being cheaper and faster, this method reportedly reduces the need to work at height significantly.

Conclusion

The APPG Report highlights the importance of health and safety compliance at all stages of the construction process.

It is important that all those working in the construction industry understand the health and safety legislation in place to protect themselves and their workers.

APPG's report can be found below:

<https://workingatheight.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Staying-Alive-APPG-REPORT.pdf>

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