TOOLBOX TALK · HEALTH & SAFETY

Confined Spaces: *The Rescue Kills Too*

Confined Spaces Regulations 1997: what counts, why you must not enter without a safe system, and why more rescuers die than workers.

Last reviewed: August 2026 HSE · Confined Spaces Regs 1997 England, Scotland and Wales ukworkrights.co.uk

In Northern Ireland, similar duties come from Northern Ireland's own health and safety law. Contact HSENI (Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland), not the HSE.

THE RISK

What counts as a confined space

- A confined space is any place that is **substantially enclosed** where there is a reasonably foreseeable **specified risk**
- It does not have to be small or hard to get into, **large tanks, silos and vessels count**
- Everyday examples people miss: **manholes, sewers, ductwork, pits, chambers, unventilated basements, grain silos and even open-topped tanks**
- The specified risks are **fire or explosion, loss of consciousness from fumes or gas, drowning, asphyxiation from free-flowing solids, and heat**
- The atmosphere can be lethal and **completely undetectable**. Oxygen depletion has no smell, taste or warning
- Hydrogen sulphide deadens the sense of smell at dangerous concentrations, so 'it smells fine now' means nothing

RESCUERS ARE OFTEN THE ONES WHO DIE

A large proportion of confined space deaths are people who went in to help. If a colleague collapses inside, do not enter. Raise the alarm and use the planned rescue arrangements.

THE LAW

Avoid entry, then control it

- The first duty is to **avoid entry altogether** if the work can reasonably be done another way: remote inspection, cameras, emptying from outside
- If entry is unavoidable, there must be a **safe system of work**, followed in practice, not just written down
- That system will normally require a **permit to work**, atmospheric testing, forced ventilation, continuous monitoring and a person stationed outside
- **Adequate emergency arrangements must be in place before entry begins**. This is a legal requirement, not good practice
- Rescue arrangements must not rely on the fire service arriving in time
- Only **trained, competent and authorised** people may enter
- Equipment must be suitable and, where flammable atmospheres are possible, **intrinsically safe**

A PERMIT IS A CONTROL, NOT PAPERWORK

A permit to work exists to force someone competent to check the atmosphere, the isolation, the rescue plan and the communications before anyone goes in. Signing it without doing those checks defeats the point entirely.

YOUR RIGHTS

What you can insist on

- To be **trained and competent** before being asked to enter, including in the emergency arrangements
- To see the **safe system of work and the permit** covering the entry
- To have the **atmosphere tested** before and monitored during entry
- To have a **top man stationed outside** with the means to raise the alarm
- To **refuse entry** where you reasonably believe there is serious and imminent danger (Employment Rights Act 1996 s.44 and s.100)
- Agency and self-employed workers are covered by the same duties as directly employed staff

IF IN DOUBT, STAY OUT

No job in a confined space is urgent enough to justify entering without testing, ventilation and a rescue plan. Raising the alarm from outside is always the right call.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Frequently asked questions

Q Is a manhole always a confined space?

Not automatically, but very often yes. The test is whether the place is substantially enclosed and whether a specified risk is reasonably foreseeable, such as gas, oxygen depletion or drowning. Most sewer and drainage chambers meet that test and must be treated as confined spaces.

Q Can I be asked to enter a confined space without training?

No. The Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 require entry to be carried out under a safe system of work by competent people, with emergency arrangements in place first. If you have not been trained in the system and the rescue plan, you should not be entering.

Q What should I do if someone collapses inside?

Do not enter. Raise the alarm immediately and use the planned rescue arrangements. A high proportion of confined space fatalities are untrained rescuers who were overcome by the same atmosphere within seconds.

FOR WHOEVER RUNS THIS TALK

Delivery notes & attendance record

Before you start

The single most important message is that untrained rescue attempts kill. Historically a large share of confined space deaths are would-be rescuers. Make sure everyone knows that the answer to a collapsed colleague is to raise the alarm, not to climb in.

Questions to ask the team

1. Which spaces on our site would count as confined, including ones that don't look like it?
2. If someone collapsed inside, what exactly would you do in the first sixty seconds?
3. Who here is trained and authorised to enter a confined space?
4. Do we have a written safe system of work and rescue arrangements for that entry?

The law behind this talk

Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 (regs. 4 and 5: avoid entry, safe system of work, emergency arrangements); Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2

Employers must give workers comprehensible information, instruction and training on the risks they face, Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c) and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 reg. 10. Keep the record below as evidence that you did.

Attendance record

Topic	Confined Spaces: The Rescue Kills Too
Date	
Site / location	
Delivered by	
Actions agreed	
Next talk due	

Attendees

Name	Signature

Use the Print handout button to print this record. General information only, not legal advice. This toolbox talk is generic material and is not a substitute for a suitable and sufficient risk assessment by a competent person. Employers remain responsible for their duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

FREE H&S GUIDES

Confined Spaces *free guide*

Get plain-English information on your rights and your employer's legal duties.

HSE: REPORT AN ISSUE
0300 003 1647
hse.gov.uk

ACAS
0300 123 1100
acas.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE (ENGLAND)
0800 144 8848
citizensadvice.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE (WALES)
0800 702 2020
citizensadvice.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE SCOTLAND
0800 028 1456
cas.org.uk

UK WORK RIGHTS
Confined Spaces
ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-confinedspaces.html

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OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Acas

- Helpline: 0300 123 1100, Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.
- Another language: call the helpline and ask for an interpreter. Acas says it can provide one straight away.
- Welsh: Acas can provide its services in Welsh if you ask.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK, 18001 0300 123 1100, on the Relay UK app or a textphone. You type what you want to say and get text replies from the adviser.
- British Sign Language (BSL): call the helpline through the InterpretersLive! video relay service, in your browser or on the InterpretersLive! app. The interpreter calls Acas and translates between you and the adviser.
- If you cannot call the helpline (for example, you find it hard to speak on the phone, you are not in the UK, or you don't have enough phone credit), use the Acas accessibility form to ask for advice another way. Acas usually replies by email within 10 working days, by BSL or lip reading video call within 2 working days, or by phone within 5 working days. Acas reviews these requests Tuesday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Early conciliation: if your case is already in conciliation, contact your conciliator. Their details are in your "Introducing Your Conciliator" email.
- Training, mediation support, collective conciliation or arbitration (not advice): Acas Training and Customer Services, 0300 123 1150, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, or email events@acas.org.uk. Relay UK: 18001 0300 123 1150. You can ask for an interpreter or call through InterpretersLive!. To book a BSL interpreter in advance for any Acas service, email events@acas.org.uk or call 0300 123 1150.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in England

- Adviceline: 0800 144 8848. Usually open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, not on public holidays. Free from mobiles and landlines. At busy times you might wait up to an hour. If you call from a mobile you'll be asked for your postcode.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK. Dial 18001 then 0800 144 8848, using the app or a textphone. There's no extra charge.
- Money or debt: debt helpline 0800 240 4420, Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9.30am to 1pm, not on public holidays. Relay UK: 18001 then 0800 240 4420.
- Online chat with an adviser: debt problems (Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9.30am to 1pm); claiming Universal Credit (Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm); energy bills or supply, consumer problems, or any other problem (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm).
- Your local Citizens Advice: search by postcode or town on the Citizens Advice website. Most can only help if you live or work in their area.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in Wales

- Advicelink: 0800 702 2020. Monday to Friday 8am to 7pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm, not on public holidays. Free from mobiles and landlines. At busy times you might wait up to an hour.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK. Dial 18001 then 0800 702 2020, using the app or a textphone. There's no extra charge.
- Online chat with an adviser: usually Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Your local Citizens Advice: search by postcode or town on the Citizens Advice website.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in Scotland

- Free phone line to your local bureau: 0800 028 1456. Say the first part of your postcode and you'll be put through.
- British Sign Language (BSL): make a free BSL call to an adviser through the Contact Scotland BSL website or app (video relay interpreting on a computer, tablet or mobile). Contact Scotland BSL is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Language or access needs: tell the bureau and they'll do their best to meet them.
- Applying for Universal Credit for the first time: Help to Claim helpline 0800 023 2581, Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm, or webchat on the Citizens Advice Scotland website. There's also a BSL service for Universal Credit applications.
- Defined contribution pensions (aged 50 or over): Pension Wise, 0800 138 3944, or +44 20 3733 3495 from outside the UK.
- NHS complaints in Scotland: Patient Advice and Support Service (PASS), 0800 917 2127, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Gambling Support Service advice line: 0800 328 1131, Monday to Friday, 10am to 3pm.
- Your local bureau: find its contact details and opening times by postcode on the Citizens Advice Scotland website.
- If you cannot hear or speak on the phone, you can use Relay UK to make the call by typing. Use the free Relay UK app, or a textphone: dial 18001 first, then the number.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact HSE

- Tell HSE about a health and safety issue: use the online form, or call 0300 003 1647 and HSE will fill it in for you. Building safety (Building Safety Regulator): 0300 790 6787.
- Ask HSE about health and safety, or reach a named person at HSE: use the online form, or call 0300 003 1747.
- Both lines: Monday and Tuesday 8.30am to 5pm, Wednesday 10am to 5pm, Thursday and Friday 8.30am to 5pm.
- Fatal and major injuries only: Incident Contact Centre, 0345 300 9923, Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm. Report everything else online.
- Out of hours, only after a work-related death, a serious incident with several casualties, or one causing major disruption: duty officer, 0151 922 9235.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: HSE says it provides a text relay service for people who are D/deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment.
- If you cannot hear or speak on the phone, you can use Relay UK to make the call by typing. Use the free Relay UK app, or a textphone: dial 18001 first, then the number.
- Website information in another format (accessible PDF, large print, easy read, audio or braille): use HSE's online contact form. HSE replies within 21 days.
- Other languages: HSE publishes translated information in many languages (hse.gov.uk/languages).

KEEP GOING

More free *toolbox talks*

TOOLBOX TALK

Hot Works

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-hotworks.html

TOOLBOX TALK

COSHH

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-coshh.html

TOOLBOX TALK

Risk Assessment

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-riskassessment.html

FREE GUIDE

Health and safety at work

ukworkrights.co.uk/guide-health-safety.html