TOOLBOX TALK · HEALTH & SAFETY

Ladders & Stepladders: *Short Falls Still Kill*

Work at Height Regulations 2005, when a ladder is the right equipment, pre-use checks, safe use and your right to refuse unsafe work.

Last reviewed: August 2026 HSE · Work at Height Regs 2005 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

Why ladders still cause serious injury

- **Falls from height remain the single biggest cause of workplace deaths in Great Britain**: 31 of the 126 worker fatalities in 2025/26
- Most falls are from **low heights**: a fall of under two metres can kill or cause life-changing injury
- The most common causes are **overreaching, unsuitable ground, unsecured ladders and damaged equipment**
- Ladders are **not banned**. That is a myth. They are permitted for low-risk, short-duration work
- A ladder becomes the wrong choice when the job needs **both hands, heavy tools, or more than about 30 minutes**
- Stepladders fail most often through **side-on working and standing on the top step**

TWO METRES IS NOT A SAFETY LINE

There is no height below which falling is safe. People are killed falling from the third or fourth rung. The Work at Height Regulations apply at any height where a fall could cause injury.

THE HIERARCHY

Avoid, prevent, minimise

- The law sets an order you must follow: **avoid work at height** where you reasonably can
- If you cannot avoid it, **prevent falls** using the right equipment: a tower, MEWP or podium before a ladder
- If you cannot prevent falls, **minimise the distance and consequences**
- A ladder is acceptable only where the risk assessment shows the task is **low risk and short duration**
- Ladders must be **secured, on firm level ground, at roughly 75 degrees** (the one-in-four rule)
- Leaning ladders used for access must extend **at least one metre above the landing point**
- Maintain **three points of contact** and do not carry loads that stop you gripping

THE 1-IN-4 RULE

For every four units up, place the base one unit out. Too steep and it tips back; too shallow and the feet slide out. This is the most common ladder setup error on UK sites.

Checks, records and refusing unsafe work

- Ladders must be **inspected before use** by the user: stiles, feet, rungs, locking mechanisms
- A **detailed recorded inspection** should be carried out periodically by a competent person
- **Damaged ladders must be taken out of use immediately** and physically tagged or removed, not left in the rack
- Home-made repairs, painted ladders (paint hides cracks) and makeshift feet are not acceptable
- You have the right to **refuse work you reasonably believe is seriously and imminently dangerous** (Employment Rights Act 1996 s.44 and s.100)
- That protection is a **day-one right** with no qualifying period, and dismissal for it is automatically unfair

REFUSING UNSAFE WORK IS PROTECTED

If you stop work because you genuinely and reasonably believe there is serious and imminent danger, you are protected from dismissal and from detriment such as losing shifts or pay.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Frequently asked questions

Q Are ladders banned on construction sites?

No. This is one of the most persistent myths in UK construction. HSE has never banned ladders. They are permitted for low-risk, short-duration work where a risk assessment shows a ladder is suitable. What is not acceptable is using a ladder because it is convenient when a tower or MEWP is clearly the right equipment.

Q How long is 'short duration'?

HSE guidance uses around 30 minutes in one position as a rule of thumb. Beyond that, or where the work requires both hands, heavy tools or a lot of reaching, a ladder is unlikely to be the right equipment.

Q Who is responsible for inspecting ladders?

The user must check the ladder before each use. The employer must ensure ladders are maintained and that a competent person carries out periodic recorded inspections. Damaged ladders must be removed from service, not just reported.

FOR WHOEVER RUNS THIS TALK

Delivery notes & attendance record

Before you start

There is a persistent myth that ladders are banned. They are not. Use this talk to correct that and to focus on the real rule: a ladder is fine for low-risk, short-duration work. Ask people to check the ladders on site during the talk.

Questions to ask the team

1. Is a ladder the right kit for the job you're doing today, or is it just the nearest?
2. When was the ladder you're using last inspected, and by whom?
3. How long will you be up there, and is it really short-duration work?
4. Can you keep three points of contact, or will you need both hands free?

The law behind this talk

Work at Height Regulations 2005 (regs. 6, 7 and Schedule 6); Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998

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	Ladders & Stepladders: Short Falls Still Kill
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

Ladders & Stepladders *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
Ladders & Stepladders
ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-ladders.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

Working at Height

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-workingatheight.html

TOOLBOX TALK

Slips, Trips & Falls

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-slipstrips.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