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WORKING ALONE IN SAFETY

Controlling the risks of solitary work



Is it legal to work alone and is it safe? The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is frequently asked these questions. There is no single answer; it will depend on the findings of risk assessment but often the answer will be yes. This leaflet will help anyone who employs or engages lone workers.

The leaflet gives general guidance on working alone. It offers advice on how to comply with duties towards lone workers under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSW Act) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work (MHSW) Regulations 1999.

Employers have responsibilities for the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees and the health and safety of those affected by the work, eg visitors, such as contractors and self-employed people who employers may engage. These responsibilities cannot be transferred to people who work alone. It is the employer's duty to assess risks to lone workers and take steps to avoid or control risk where necessary. Employees have responsibilities to take reasonable care of themselves and other people affected by their work and to co-operate with their employers in meeting their legal obligations.

This leaflet may also help self-employed people who work alone themselves or engage lone workers.

Who are lone workers and what jobs do they do?

Lone workers are those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision. They are found in a wide range of situations; some examples are given below.

People in fixed establishments where:

- only one person works on the premises, eg in small workshops, petrol stations, kiosks, shops and also homeworkers;
- people work separately from others, eg in factories, warehouses, some research and training establishments, leisure centres or fairgrounds;
- people work outside normal hours, eg cleaners, security, special production, maintenance or repair staff etc.

Mobile workers working away from their fixed base:

- on construction, plant installation, maintenance and cleaning work, electrical repairs, lift repairs, painting and decorating, vehicle recovery etc;
- agricultural and forestry workers;
- service workers, eg rent collectors, postal staff, social workers, home helps, district nurses, pest control workers, drivers, engineers, architects, estate agents, sales representatives and similar professionals visiting domestic and commercial premises.

Can people legally work alone? Assessing and controlling the risks

Although there is no general legal prohibition on working alone, the broad duties of the HSW Act and MHSW Regulations still apply. These require identifying hazards of the work, assessing the risks involved, and putting measures in place to avoid or control the risks.

It is important to talk to employees and their safety representatives as they are a valuable source of information and advice. This will help to ensure that all relevant hazards have been identified and appropriate controls chosen; consultation with employees and their representatives on health and safety matters is a legal duty anyway.

Control measures may include instruction, training, supervision, protective equipment etc. Employers should take steps to check that control measures are used and review the risk assessment from time to time to ensure it is still adequate.

When risk assessment shows that it is not possible for the work to be done safely by a lone worker, arrangements for providing help or back-up should be put in place. Where a lone worker is working at another employer's workplace, that employer should inform the lone worker's employer of any risks and the control measures that should be taken. This helps the lone worker's employer to assess the risks.

Risk assessment should help decide the right level of supervision. There are some high-risk activities where at least one other person may

need to be present. Examples include some high-risk confined space working where a supervisor may need to be present, as well as someone dedicated to the rescue role, and electrical work at or near exposed live conductors where at least two people are sometimes required.

Employers need to be aware of any specific law on lone working applying in their industry (examples include supervision in diving operations, vehicles carrying explosives, fumigation work).

Sources of further information are listed at the end of the leaflet.

If you have five or more employees you must record the significant findings of your risk assessment.

Further detail is now given on issues to consider when assessing risks from lone working.

Safe working arrangements for lone workers

Establishing safe working for lone workers is no different from organising the safety of other employees. Employers need to know the law and standards which apply to their work activities and then assess whether the requirements can be met by people working alone.

Lone workers face particular problems. Some of the issues which need special attention when planning safe working arrangements are as follows:

Can the risks of the job be adequately controlled by one person?

Lone workers should not be at more risk than other employees. This may require extra risk-control measures. Precautions should take account of normal work and foreseeable emergencies, eg fire, equipment failure, illness and accidents. Employers should identify situations where people work alone and ask questions such as:

- Does the workplace present a special risk to the lone worker?
- Is there a safe way in and a way out for one person? Can any temporary access equipment which is necessary, such as portable ladders or trestles, be safely handled by one person?
- Can all the plant, substances and goods involved in the work be safely handled by one person? Consider whether the work involves lifting objects too large for one person or whether more than one person is needed to operate essential controls for the safe running of equipment.
- Is there a risk of violence?
- Are women especially at risk if they work alone?
- Are young workers especially at risk if they work alone?

Is the person medically fit and suitable to work alone?

Check that lone workers have no medical conditions which make them unsuitable for working alone. Seek medical advice if necessary. Consider both routine work and foreseeable emergencies which may impose additional physical and mental burdens on the individual.

What training is required to ensure competency in safety matters?

Training is particularly important where there is limited supervision to control, guide and help in situations of uncertainty. Training may be critical to avoid panic reactions in unusual situations. Lone workers need to be sufficiently experienced and to understand the risks and precautions fully. Employers should set the limits to what can and cannot be done while working alone. They should ensure employees are competent to deal with circumstances which are new, unusual or beyond the scope of training, eg when to stop work and seek advice from a supervisor and how to handle aggression.

How will the person be supervised?

Although lone workers cannot be subject to constant supervision, it is still an employer's duty to ensure their health and safety at work. Supervision can help to ensure that employees understand the risks associated with their work and that the necessary safety precautions are carried out. Supervisors can also provide guidance in situations of uncertainty. Supervision of health and safety

can often be carried out when checking the progress and quality of the work; it may take the form of periodic site visits combined with discussions in which health and safety issues are raised.

The extent of supervision required depends on the risks involved and the ability of the lone worker to identify and handle health and safety issues. Employees new to a job, undergoing training, doing a job which presents special risks, or dealing with new situations may need to be accompanied at first. The level of supervision required is a management decision which should be based on the findings of risk assessment. The higher the risk, the greater the level of supervision required. It should not be left to individuals to decide whether they require assistance.

Procedures will need to be put in place to monitor lone workers to see they remain safe. These may include:

- supervisors periodically visiting and observing people working alone;
- regular contact between the lone worker and supervision using either a telephone or radio;
- automatic warning devices which operate if specific signals are not received periodically from the lone worker, eg systems for security staff;
- other devices designed to raise the alarm in the event of an emergency and which are operated manually or automatically by the absence of activity;

- checks that a lone worker has returned to their base or home on completion of a task.

What happens if a person becomes ill, has an accident, or there is an emergency?

Lone workers should be capable of responding correctly to emergencies. Risk assessment should identify foreseeable events. Emergency procedures should be established and employees trained in them. Information about emergency procedures and danger areas should be given to lone workers who visit your premises. Lone workers should have access to adequate first-aid facilities and mobile workers should carry a first-aid kit suitable for treating minor injuries. Occasionally risk assessment may indicate that lone workers need training in first aid.

Further information

Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 SI 1997/1713 HMSO 1997 ISBN 0 11 065643 6

Safe work in confined spaces. Confined Spaces Regulations 1997. Approved Code of Practice L101 HSE Books 1997 0 7176 1405 0

Electricity at Work Regulations 1989 SI 1989/635 HMSO 1989 ISBN 0 11 096635 X

Memorandum of guidance on the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989 HSR25 HSE Books 1989 ISBN 0 7176 1602 9

HSE leaflet *Violence at work* INDG69 HSE Books 1997 Single copies free, multiple copies in priced packs ISBN 0 7176 1271 6

Risk assessment

Management of health and safety at work. Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L21 (Second edition) HSE Books 1999 ISBN 07176 2488 9

HSE free leaflet Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992. Updated to include changes affecting young people and new and expectant mothers MISC079 HSE Books 1997

HSE leaflet 5 steps to risk assessment INDG163(rev1) HSE Books 1998 Single copies free, multiple copies in priced packs ISBN 0 7176 1565 0

The future availability and accuracy of the references listed in this publication cannot be guaranteed.

Additional information and advice is available from your local HSE Office and Employment Medical Advisory Service, your trade association or employers' organisation, trade unions and some charities, eg The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (a national charity for personal safety) in London. Their phone numbers are in the telephone book.

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For information about health and safety ring HSE's InfoLine Tel: 08701 545500
Fax: 02920 859260 e-mail: hseinformationservices@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG. You can also visit HSE's website: www.hse.gov.uk

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 15 from HSE Books ISBN 0 7176 1507 3. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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Printed and published by the Health and Safety Executive
INDG73(rev) C300 6/01