

Minor roof maintenance work: Protecting against falls

‘Height Aware’ campaign

Information sheet 5

If you need to do minor maintenance work on a roof, this information will help you plan a safe method of work.

What is it?

Minor roof maintenance work is a task which:

- can be completed in a matter of minutes, not hours;
- is infrequent;
- only needs one or two people;
- does not involve difficult work (eg heavy or awkward loads); and
- only involves a small area.

For example, replacing a couple of roof slates.

Working from roofs is specialised work and should only be done by competent people, using a method of work specific to the job, with appropriate supervision and monitoring. Other types of roof work, which take longer, are larger in scale or more difficult need to have higher standards of fall protection, eg suitable scaffolding.

Before starting work

Before starting any roof work, first look at whether working at height can be avoided.

It may be possible to work from the basket of a boom-type MEWP (‘cherry picker’) for some survey work and repairs. This avoids people having to go onto the roof and risks from erecting and dismantling equipment.

If work at height cannot be avoided, you will need to decide how to:

- access the roof:
 - safely getting people on and off the roof;
 - safely getting materials on and off the roof;
- prevent falls from the roof, including:
 - people falling;
 - materials falling and injuring people below;

- work safely on the roof, including checking if:
 - the roof is suitable to stand on and has no fragile areas;
 - the roof can support other loads, eg materials and equipment;
 - weather conditions mean it is unsafe to carry out the work, eg high or gusting winds or icy surfaces.

By using competent people to help you answer these questions, you should be able to set out a safe method of work that competent workers will be able to follow, which will reduce the risk of an accident.

Accessing the roof

People

If possible you should use suitable existing fixed access (stairs or ladders) rather than temporary equipment. Otherwise, as a minimum, use tower scaffolds, or similar systems. These provide edge protection and a platform you can install crawling boards from.

Secured ladders will often be the preferred method for domestic pitched roof work. For other work, they should be the last resort used, eg where there is not enough space to use anything else.



Equipment and materials

Consider how to get equipment and materials onto and off the roof. Before lifting materials up the side of a tower scaffold you should assess the handling and stability risks. Forklift trucks, vehicle-mounted lorry loaders and other equipment may be readily available.

Personal fall protection

Work restraint should be used rather than fall arrest, as it prevents a fall. Fall arrest is normally the last resort as it does not prevent a fall and only protects the individual.

All work restraint or fall arrest must have:

- a strong anchor point, guttering is not suitable;
- a system to safely install temporary anchors, eg dead weight anchors, horizontal lifelines;
- properly designed systems, so that for:
 - work restraint, users cannot reach any edge from which they can fall;
 - fall arrest, there is enough clearance for deployment;
 - fall arrest, there is a rescue system in place;
- close supervision;
- trained users, so they can:
 - safely use any equipment;
 - look after any equipment;
 - use rescue procedures.

Do not use inertia reel devices horizontally and over an edge, unless they are designed for this, check with the manufacturer. Most are designed and tested for use when anchored above the user (ie vertically).



Preventing fall of materials

You should prevent the fall of tools or materials by using tool belts and other methods. Where falls cannot be prevented or completely avoided, set up exclusion zones, eg fencing. If you cannot set up effective zones in areas with public access, you will have to take other measures.

Materials, tools or debris should never be thrown down (bombed) from height.

Rescue

Consider rescue if people are using fall arrest equipment or powered access equipment. You need to have rescue plans in place and the means (people and equipment) for putting them into effect. Relying on the emergency services is generally not sufficient.

Roof strength

Is the roof suitable to stand on or put materials and equipment on? This depends on whether it is:

- fragile;
- sloping;
- slippery;
- easily damaged; or
- strong enough for other loads (eg materials).

Any roofing assembly classed as non-fragile should be treated as fragile until it is correctly fixed in position, unless the manufacturers state otherwise.

Some non-fragile surfaces become fragile with age and damage so need to be checked. You should always assume any roofing surface is fragile until confirmed otherwise by a competent person.

Want to know more?

This is one of five 'Height Aware' campaign information sheets. The others in the series are:

- Sheet 1:* Work at height: The basics
- Sheet 2:* Selecting equipment for work at height
- Sheet 3:* Selecting competent contractors for work at height
- Sheet 4:* Selecting, using and maintaining personal fall protection equipment

More information is available on the HSE website www.hse.gov.uk/falls and from HSE Infoline on 0845 345 0055.