

HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDANCE FOR LONE WORKERS

This Guidance Note 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, e.g. 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.

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;

People in fixed establishments where:

- People work outside normal hours, e.g. cleaners, security, facilities staff etc.

Mobile workers working away from their fixed base:

- On construction, maintenance and cleaning work, electrical repairs, lift repairs, painting and decorating etc.

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 risk involved, and putting measures in place to avoid or control the risks.

Control measures may include instruction, training, supervision, protective equipment etc. Steps should be taken 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.

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.

Safe working arrangements for lone workers

Establishing safe working for lone workers is no different from organising the safety of other employees. Managers should be familiar with the standards which apply to 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 risk 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, e.g. 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?

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 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, e.g. when to stop work and seek advice from a supervisor and how to handle aggression.

How will the person be supervised?

Although the lone worker 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.

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:

- Supervisor 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, e.g. 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;
- Check 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.

This guidance was produced from material provided by the HSE.