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Risk control

Working at Height Toolkit: Fragile Roofs and Surfaces



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Introduction

The Work at Height Regulations 2005¹ require that priority be given to equipment that provides collective protection as opposed to equipment that is 'personal' and protects only the person using it.

Fragile roofs are a significant problem within the UK. On average, seven people are killed each year after falling through a fragile roof or fragile roof light. Many others suffer permanent disabling injury².

Advice on how to conduct work safely on rooftops is published by the Health and Safety Executive³.

Fragile roofs take various forms, with the most common being:

- Roof lights
- Liner panels on built-up sheeted roof
- Non-reinforced fibre cement sheets
- Corroded metal sheets
- Glass (including wired glass)
- Rotted chipboard
- Slates and tiles

Even roofs that look safe can be fragile and therefore, all roofs should be considered to be fragile until a competent person has confirmed they are not.

Avoiding Fragile Roofs

As with all other types of working at height, the need to access fragile roofs should be avoided wherever possible, and only when it has been established that avoidance is not possible, should the work be permitted to take place. If working at height cannot be avoided, then the planning⁴ process should consider the safest method of conducting the work and this would involve collective means of protection taking preference over personal protection methods.

One option may be to avoid workers having to go on the roof at all by adapting a method that allows profiled roof sheets or roof lights to be replaced from underneath using a suitable work platform – this may involve the use of adapted roof fixings, advice is available from the National Federation of Roofing Contractors⁵.

In some situations, it may not be possible to avoid work involving fragile surfaces and in this scenario, a hierarchical approach to planning the work should continue, with collective protection being preferred to options based on personal protection. However, it should be remembered that

the Work at Height Regulations 2005 require that no person at work should pass across or near or work on or near a fragile surface where it is reasonably practicable to conduct the work safely without them doing so.

This means that when access is required on or near fragile surfaces, steps must be taken to ensure that workers do not fall through or from that surface. There are many different systems designed to make fragile surfaces safe, and some of these include:

- Valley walker systems – these allow access into valley gutter areas whilst providing protection against falls through the adjacent fragile surfaces
- Installation of barriers to ensure those on the roof do not stray into roof areas where parts may be fragile
- Proprietary staging systems with edge protection – these are long transportable platforms that span the roof purlins to provide a safe area for workers
- Devices to cover fragile roof lights

A proper means of access should be provided to facilitate the safe passage of workers and materials to the work area.

Typically, safe means of access to and from areas at height would include any one or a number of the following:

- Stair towers
- General access scaffolds
- Fixed or mobile scaffold towers
- Mobile access equipment
- Ladders

Where it is not practicable to prevent falls through a fragile surface, then measures must be taken to protect people by arresting a fall beneath the surface. For example, safety netting rigged to the underside of the surface, or a platform positioned below the work area, such as scaffolding.

Training

All work at height must be planned, managed, and conducted by competent people, who have a good knowledge of the risks of working at height, and the task to be undertaken. For this reason, training is essential at every stage of the working at height process.

Rescue

Rescue must be considered at the planning stage for all working at height activity, and a rescue plan should be drawn up that clearly describes the methods of executing a

rescue for any casualties. It is not acceptable to rely totally on the emergency services to conduct a rescue and local arrangements must be made.

The complexity of a rescue plan will match the complexity of the work that is being conducted and, in most cases, rescue plans are simple. However, for working at height that is more complex in nature, it will sometimes be the case that specialist rescue equipment and training is required.

Enforcement

Working on fragile surfaces is extremely dangerous and the precautions are well established. The legislation is quite clear that all roof work must be planned and organised, so it is conducted safely. Where an inspector encounters a failure to control risk, enforcement action will likely result in a prohibition notice and prosecution may follow.

References

1. Work at Height Regulations 2005. Available here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2005/735/contents/made>
2. Fragile roofs Safe working practices. Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/geis5.pdf>
3. Health and safety in roof work. Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg33.pdf>
4. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Available here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1999/3242/made>
5. The National Federation of Roofing Contractors can advise. Available here: <https://www.nfrc.co.uk>

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Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

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