

Working at Height and Safe Use of Ladders Guidance for Local URC Churches

Applies to: All local churches, church halls, manses, offices, volunteers, employees, contractors and anyone undertaking work on behalf of the church

1. Purpose

The United Reformed Church (the URC) is committed to ensuring that work at height is carried out safely and in accordance with the Work at Height Regulations 2005 and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance. Work at height remains one of the leading causes of serious injury and fatalities in the UK.

This guidance sets out the minimum requirements for planning, organising and carrying out work at height in local churches, including the safe use of ladders and step ladders.

2. Scope

This guidance applies to all activities where a person could fall and injure themselves, including:

- Changing light bulbs
- Hanging banners, decorations or displays
- Accessing storage areas
- Minor maintenance tasks
- Window cleaning
- Roof inspections
- Gutter clearance
- Working from stages, platforms or raised areas

It applies equally to:

- Employees
- Ministers
- Volunteers
- Church officers
- Contractors engaged by the church

Volunteers

The church owes a duty of care to volunteers undertaking activities on its behalf. Volunteers carrying out work at height must be suitably competent, physically capable and adequately instructed. No volunteer should feel under pressure to undertake work at height.

3. Key Principles

Churches must follow the HSE hierarchy for working at height:

Step 1: Avoid Working at Height

Before any task is undertaken, ask “*Can this work be done from the ground?*”

Examples include:

- Using extendable poles to change high-level fittings
- Lowering equipment to ground level for maintenance
- Using long-handled cleaning equipment

Step 2: Prevail Falls

If work at height cannot be avoided, use the safest method available, such as:

- Existing permanent platforms
- Mobile access towers
- Mobile elevated work platforms (MEWPs)
- Properly erected scaffolding

Step 3: Minimise Consequences

If a fall risk remains:

- Reduce the distance of any potential fall
- Use suitable fall protection where appropriate
- Ensure emergency arrangements are in place

These principles reflect the requirements of the Work at Height Regulations and HSE guidance.

4. Risk Assessment

A suitable risk assessment must be completed before work at height begins.

The assessment should consider:

- Height involved
- Duration of task
- Condition of equipment
- Ground conditions
- Lighting
- Weather conditions (for external work)
- Competence of those involved
- Risk to members of the public or congregation
- Physical capability of those involved
- Lone working arrangements
- Public access to the premises
- Presence of children or vulnerable adults
- Historic building features
- Fragile surfaces
- Access to emergency assistance

The findings should be recorded where significant risks are identified.

5. Common Church Activities

This guidance applies to, but is not limited to:

- Changing sanctuary, hall and external light bulbs
- Hanging banners, notices and displays
- Installing Christmas and Easter decorations
- Flower festival displays
- Servicing projectors screens and audio-visual equipment

- Accessing loft storage
- Bell tower and clock tower access
- Window cleaning
- Investigating roof leaks
- Cleaning gutters

These activities must be assessed before work begins.

6. Physical Capability

Individuals should only undertake work at height where they are physically capable of doing so safely.

Consider:

- Mobility and balance
- Vision
- Medical conditions
- Vertigo or dizziness
- Recent injuries
- Medication that may impair coordination or judgement

Where there is doubt, an alternative person or contractor should be engaged.

7. When Can Ladders Be Used

HSE does not prohibit ladders. Ladders may be appropriate where the task is:

- Low risk
- Short duration
- Infrequent
- Does not require excessive force
- Allows the user to maintain three points of contact

However, ladders should not automatically be the first choice. Alternative access equipment should be considered first.

Suitable Examples

- ✓ Replacing a light bulb
- ✓ Putting up a noticeboard display
- ✓ Inspecting an alarm sensor
- ✓ Accessing a storage shelf briefly

Unsuitable Examples

- ☒ Extended decorating projects
- ☒ Carrying heavy equipment
- ☒ Working on church roofs
- ☒ Tasks requiring significant sideways reaching
- ☒ Working lasting a prolonged period
- ☒ Accessing church roofs
- ☒ Entering unsafe loft spaces
- ☒ Working on fragile surfaces
- ☒ Extended decorating projects
- ☒ Tower repairs

When Contractors Should be Used

Work involving:

- Roofs
- Fragile surfaces
- Towers
- Scaffolding
- Mobile access towers
- Fall arrest systems

8. Fragile Surfaces

No person should work on or near fragile surfaces unless approved controls are in place.

Examples include:

- Fragile roofs
- Skylights
- Roof lights
- Asbestos cement sheet
- Deteriorated roofing materials

Specialist contractors should normally be engaged for such work.

9. Ladder Safety Requirements

Before Use

The user must inspect the ladder for:

- Damage to stiles
- Bent or missing rungs
- Cracks
- Loose fittings
- Missing feet
- Signs of corrosion or excessive wear

Do not use damaged ladders.

Any defective ladders must be:

- Taken out of service immediately
- Clearly labelled "Do Not Use"
- Repaired or disposed of appropriately

Ladder Positioning

Leaning ladders should:

- Be placed on firm, level ground
- Be positioned at approximately a 75° angle (the 1 in 4 rule)
- Extend at least one metre above the landing point if used for access
- Be secured where reasonably practicable

The surrounding area should be free from:

- Trip hazards

- Obstructions
- Doors likely to open onto the ladder

Three Points of Contact

Users should maintain two feet and one hand or two hands and one foot at all times where possible.

Overreaching is prohibited. Instead:

- Descend safely
- Reposition the ladder
- Resume work

HSE identifies overreaching as a major cause of ladder-related incidents.

10. Step Ladder Safety

When using step ladders:

Do

- ✓ Open fully
- ✓ Ensure locking mechanisms are engaged
- ✓ Use on level surfaces
- ✓ Face the task
- ✓ Keep your weight centred

Do Not

- ☒ Stand on the top step unless designed for that purpose
- ☒ Climb using the rear braces
- ☒ Use as a leaning ladder
- ☒ Move while someone is standing on it

11. Prohibited Practices

The following are not permitted:

- Standing on chairs, pews or tables
- Using stacked boxes as access equipment
- Improvising working platforms
- Using damaged ladders
- Working from ladders in severe weather
- Overloading ladders
- Supporting ladders on unstable surfaces

12. Training and Competence

Anyone using a ladder for church activities must:

- Be physically capable of carrying out the task safely
- Receive instruction on safe ladder use
- Understand this guidance
- Know how to undertake a pre-use inspection

For more complex work at height, competent contractors should be appointed.

Access Restrictions

Access to high-risk areas such as roof spaces, towers and elevated plant areas should be restricted to authorised persons who have received appropriate instructions.

13. Lone Working

Where reasonably practicable, work at height should not be undertaken alone.

A second person should be available where there is increased risk, such as:

- Loft access
- Tower access
- External ladder work
- Work above 2 metres
- Gutter cleaning
- Roof inspections

Suitable communication arrangements must be in place.

14. Roof Spaces and Lofts

Additional hazards may include:

- Fragile ceilings
- Poor lighting
- Restricted movement
- Dust and debris
- Asbestos containing materials
- Unprotected edges

Entry should only occur where necessary and following a suitable risk assessment.

15. Towers and Bell Towers

Church towers and bell chambers may present additional hazards including:

- Steep staircases
- Fixed ladders
- Restricted escape routes
- Low lighting
- Uneven surfaces

Access should be limited to authorised persons.

16. Historic and Listed Buildings

Many church buildings are historic or listed and may present additional risks due to:

- Ageing structures
- Fragile materials
- Restricted access arrangements
- Uneven floors
- Historic fixtures and fittings

Where structural condition is uncertain, specialist advice should be obtained.

17. Contractor Management

Before appointing contractors, the church should obtain:

- Evidence of competence
- Public liability insurance
- Employer's liability insurance, where applicable
- Risk assessments
- Method statements for higher-risk work
- References or evidence of similar work

For significant work at height, competitive quotations should normally be sought.

18. Protecting Building Users

During work at height:

- The area should be cordoned off where necessary
- Warning signs should be displayed
- Access routes should be managed
- Activities should be scheduled to minimize disruption and risk

Particular care should be taken when children, vulnerable adults or members of the public may be present.

19. Emergency Arrangements

Before work begins:

- Ensure a means of communication is available
- Do not work at height alone where significant risk exists
- Ensure first aid arrangements are in place
- Know how emergency services would access the location if required

20. Inspection and Storage of Ladders

Churches should maintain ladders in good condition.

Ladders should:

- Be stored securely
- Be protected from damage and weather
- Be inspected regularly
- Have defects recorded and addressed promptly

A simple ladder inspection record should be maintained for ladders owned by the church.

Ladder Register

The church should maintain a register of all church-owned ladders and step ladders.

The register should record:

- Unique identifier
- Location
- Inspection dates
- Identified defects
- Disposal or replacement dates

Formal inspections should be carried out periodically and documented.

21. Responsibilities

Church Elders/Trustees

- Ensure work at height risks are managed
- Provide suitable equipment where necessary
- Arrange appropriate inspections and maintenance
- Ensure contractors are competent

Employees and Volunteers

- Follow this guidance
- Use equipment correctly
- Report defects immediately
- Stop work if unsafe conditions arise

22. Incident and Near-Miss Reporting

All incidents involving work at height should be reported. This includes:

- Falls
- Slips
- Dropped objects
- Equipment failures
- Near misses

Records should be reviewed so that lessons learned can improve future safety arrangements.

Quick Safety Checklist

Before using a ladder ask:

- ☐ Can the job be done from ground level?
- ☐ Is a ladder the safest option?
- ☐ Has the ladder been inspected?
- ☐ Is the ground firm and level?
- ☐ Can three points of contact be maintained?
- ☐ Is the work short duration and low risk?
- ☐ Have others been protected from the work area?
- ☐ Is there a safer alternative available?

If the answer to any of the above is **No**, stop and reassess the work before proceeding.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the church's Health and Safety Policy and contractor management procedures.

Appendices included

Appendix A: Pre-Use Ladder Inspection Checklist

Appendix B: Working at Height Risk Assessment Template

Appendix C: Ladder Inspection Record

Appendix A: Pre-Use Ladder Inspection Checklist

Pre-Use Ladder Inspection Checklist

Purpose: This checklist should be completed before each use of a ladder or stepladder. If any item is marked **No**, the equipment must not be used until the issue has been rectified.

Church:
Location:
Date:
Ladder ID/Description:
Inspected By:

Section 1: Condition of Ladder

Check	Yes	No
Ladder appears clean and free from oil, grease or other contamination	☐	☐
Both stiles (side rails) are straight and undamaged	☐	☐
All rungs or steps, are present and secure	☐	☐
No cracks, splits, dents or distortion are visible	☐	☐
Feet are present and in good condition	☐	☐
Fixings, hinges and locking devices are secure	☐	☐
No evidence of corrosion, excessive wear or deterioration	☐	☐
Manufacturer's labels and safety markings are legible	☐	☐

Section 2: Additional Checks for Stepladders

Check	Yes	No
Stepladder opens fully	☐	☐
Spreader bars or locking devices operate correctly	☐	☐
Platform (if fitted) is secure and undamaged	☐	☐
Rear legs and braces are undamaged	☐	☐

Section 3: Suitability for the Task

Check	Yes	No
The ladder is suitable for the work being undertaken	☐	☐
The task is low risk and of short duration	☐	☐
The user does not need to overreach	☐	☐
The user is physically capable of carrying out the work safely	☐	☐
A safer access method is not reasonably practicable	☐	☐

Section 4: Work Area Assessment

Check	Yes	No
Ground or floor surface is firm, level and stable	☐	☐
Area around the ladder is free from trip hazards	☐	☐
Lighting is adequate	☐	☐
Doors, gates and walkaways have been considered and controlled	☐	☐
The work area is protected from public access where necessary	☐	☐
Weather conditions are suitable (for external work)	☐	☐
Emergency assistance can be summoned if required	☐	☐

Section 5: Church-Specific Considerations

Where applicable, have the following been considered?

Check	Yes	No	N/A
Members of the public may enter the area during work	☐	☐	☐
Children or vulnerable adults may be present	☐	☐	☐
The work involves a tower, loft space or roof area	☐	☐	☐
The building is listed or contains fragile historic features	☐	☐	☐
Additional controls have been implemented if required	☐	☐	☐

Inspection Outcome

☐ **PASS** – Ladder/Stepladder may be used

☐ **FAIL** – Do NOT use. Remove from service and report defect

If failed, state reason:

Inspector Declaration

I confirm that I have inspected this ladder/stepladder and, to the best of my knowledge, it is safe for use for the task identified above.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Immediate “Do Not Use” Defects

A ladder or stepladder must be taken out of service immediately if any of the following are identified:

- Cracked or damaged stiles
- Missing, loose or damaged rungs
- Missing or worn feet
- Bent or distorted ladder sections
- Defective locking mechanisms
- Significant corrosion
- Evidence of previous unsafe repairs
- Any defect that may affect stability or safe use

Remember: If in doubt, do not use the ladder. Seek advice from the Church Health and Safety coordinator, property officer, or appoint a competent contractor.

Appendix B: Working at Height Risk Assessment Template

Purpose: This template should be completed before undertaking any work at height where there is a risk of injury from a fall. The assessment should be proportionate to the nature and complexity of the task.

Working at Height Risk Assessment

General Information

Church: _____

Location of Work: _____

Description of Task: _____

Date of Assessment: _____

Assessor: _____

Proposed Work Date(s): _____

Person(s) Undertaking Work: _____

Step 1: Can the Work at Height Be Avoided?

Describe how you have considered carrying out the work from ground level:

☐ Work at height cannot reasonably be avoided

☐ Alternative methods have been considered

Step 2: Hazards Identified

Tick all that apply:

Hazard	Yes	No
Falling from a ladder or stepladder	☐	☐
Falling from a roof or elevated area	☐	☐
Falling through a fragile surface	☐	☐
Overreaching while working	☐	☐
Unsafe access or egress	☐	☐
Slips or trips at height	☐	☐
Falling objects striking others	☐	☐
Adverse weather conditions	☐	☐
Public access to the area	☐	☐
Children or vulnerable adults present	☐	☐
Poor lighting	☐	☐
Lone working	☐	☐
Loft or roof-space hazards	☐	☐
Tower or bell chamber access	☐	☐
Manual handling of equipment	☐	☐
Other (specify below	☐	☐

Other Hazards Identified:

Step 3: Who Might Be Harmed?

Tick all that apply:

- ☐ Employees
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ Minister
- ☐ Elders/Trustees
- ☐ Contractors
- ☐ Members of the congregation
- ☐ Children
- ☐ Visitors
- ☐ Members of the public
- ☐ Other: _____

Step 4: Existing Control Measures

Tick all controls already in place:

Control Measure	Yes	No
Work at height has been planned	☐	☐
Suitable access equipment selected	☐	☐
Equipment inspected before use	☐	☐
Users are competent	☐	☐
Area below work cordoned off	☐	☐
Warning signs displayed	☐	☐
Public access restricted	☐	☐
Three points of contact can be maintained	☐	☐
Weather conditions assessed	☐	☐
Emergency arrangements considered	☐	☐

Suitable footwear worn	☐	☐
Work will not be undertaken alone	☐	☐
Contractor competence verified	☐	☐

Step 5: Access Equipment to Be Used

Tick one:

- ☐ Step Ladder
- ☐ Leaning ladder
- ☐ Mobile tower scaffold
- ☐ Mobile elevating work platform (MEWP)
- ☐ Fixed access platform
- ☐ Scaffolding
- ☐ Contractor specialist equipment
- ☐ Other: _____

Justification for selection:

Step 6: Additional Controls Required

Describe any additional measures required before work starts.

Action Required	Responsible Person	Target Date

Step 7: Risk Rating

Before Controls

Likelihood	Severity	Overall Risk
☐ Low	☐ Low	☐ Low
☐ Medium	☐ Medium	☐ Medium
☐ High	☐ High	☐ High

After Controls

Likelihood	Severity	Residual Risk
☐ Low	☐ Low	☐ Low
☐ Medium	☐ Medium	☐ Medium
☐ High	☐ High	☐ High

Step 8: Emergency Arrangements

How would assistance be obtained if an accident occurred

Location of first aid kit:

Nearest available first aider:

Emergency contact name and number:

Step 9: Approval

I confirm that the risks associated with this work at height activity have been assessed and that appropriate controls will be implemented before work begins.

Assessor

Name: _____

Signatures: _____

Date: _____

Authorising Elder, Trustee or Responsible Person

Name: _____

Role: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Guidance Notes

A ladder or stepladder should generally only be used where:

- The task is low risk
- The duration is short
- Three points of contact can be maintained
- The work does not require significant force or overreaching
- A safer alternative is not reasonably practicable

The church should normally appoint a competent contractor where work involves:

- Roofs or roof edges
- Fragile surfaces
- Bell towers or high-level structures
- Scaffolding
- Specialist fall-arrest equipment
- Significant or prolonged work at height

Remember: If the work cannot be undertaken safely, it should not proceed until suitable additional controls are in place.

Appendix C: Ladder and Stepladder Inspection Record

Ladder and Stepladder Inspection Record

Purpose: This record provides evidence of periodic inspections of church-owned ladders and stepladders. It should be retained as part of the church's health and safety records.

Recommended Inspection Frequency: every 6 to 12 months, depending on frequency of use, and following any incident, damage, or significant repair.

Church: _____

Inspection: _____

Responsible Person: _____

Ladder Inventory Record

Item ID	Ladder Type	Location	Manufacturer	Length/Height	Date Purchased (if known)

Formal Inspection Record

Ladder Identification Details

Item ID: _____

Type:

☐ Stepladder

☐ Extension ladder

☐ Platform stepladder

☐ Combination ladder

☐ Other: _____

Usual Storage Location: _____

Inspection Date: _____

Inspector: _____

Inspection Checklist

General Condition

Inspection Item	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Comments
Ladder clean and free from contamination	☐	☐	
Stiles (side rails) undamaged	☐	☐	
No cracks, splits or distortion	☐	☐	
Rungs/steps secure and undamaged	☐	☐	
Feet present and in good condition	☐	☐	
No excessive wear or corrosion	☐	☐	
Labels and markings legible	☐	☐	

Additional Checks for Stepladders

Inspection Item	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Comments
Hinges operate correctly	☐	☐	
Locking devices function properly	☐	☐	
Spreader bars secure and undamaged	☐	☐	
Platform (where fitted) secure	☐	☐	
Rear legs and braces sound	☐	☐	

Defects Identified

Details of any defects, wear, damage or concerns:

Action Taken

- ☐ No action required
- ☐ Monitor condition
- ☐ Repair required
- ☐ Withdraw from service
- ☐ Dispose of equipment

Details:

Inspection Outcome

- ☐ PASS – Equipment suitable for continued use
- ☐ PASS WITH MONITORING – Minor issues noted
- ☐ FAIL – Remove from service immediately

Next Inspection Due

Date: _____

Inspector Declaration

I confirm that I have inspected this ladder/stepladder and recorded its condition accurately.

Inspector Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Equipment Withdrawal Record

(To be completed where a ladder or stepladder is taken out of service.)

Item ID: _____

Date Withdrawn: _____

Reason for Withdrawal:

- ☐ Damaged
- ☐ Failed Inspection
- ☐ Beyond Economic Repair
- ☐ Age/Condition
- ☐ Incident Involvement
- ☐ Other: _____

Details:

Authorised By: _____

Role: _____

Date: _____

Guidance for Churches

A ladder or stepladder should be removed from service immediately if any of the following are identified:

- Damaged or bent stiles
- Missing, loose or damaged rungs/steps
- Missing feet or anti-slip components
- Defective locking mechanisms
- Significant corrosions or deterioration
- Unauthorised repairs
- Evidence that stability or structural integrity may be compromised

Defective equipment should be clearly marked “DO NOT USE” and stored separately until repaired or disposed of.

