

Fragile roofs

What you need to know as a building owner, user or managing agent

On average, nine people die every year falling through a fragile roof or roof light. Many others are seriously injured.

These accidents usually happen on roofs of factories, warehouses and farm buildings while repairing, maintaining plant, installing equipment, cleaning gutters and skylights, surveying the roof or inspecting roofwork.

This sheet can help you prevent these deaths happening in your building. Keep it safe!

If you are responsible for roof repairs, and you have – or think you may have – a fragile roof, whether you're an owner or occupier, a farmer, run a workshop or are a landlord of industrial units, there are a few simple steps you can take to meet your responsibilities.

- Always assume that the roof is fragile unless you are certain it is not.
- Don't go on to a fragile roof yourself, or expect others to do so, without the right equipment to prevent falls and the skills and experience to use it correctly.
- Don't go onto a roof for work like gutter clearing, inspecting or surveying. These can often be done from ground level, or using a mobile elevating work platform (MEWP), or a tower scaffold. Short duration work can often be done using a secured ladder or one with a 'stand-off' device.
- Never walk along the line of fixing bolts above supports, or along the ridge. Would you walk a tightrope?
- Make sure whoever you ask to do work on a fragile roof (whether a company or an individual) is experienced and aware of the risks.

A roof can be fragile if it is not strong enough to support a person's weight.

This includes:

- Old roof lights (sometimes painted)
- Non-reinforced fibre cement sheets
- Asbestos cement sheets
- Corroded metal sheets
- Glass (including wired glass)
- Slates and tiles in poor condition

- Allow the company/individual time to plan the work:
 - even in 'emergency' situations;
 - tell them about the type, condition and history of the roof and its accessibility inside and outside.
- Ask them to describe verbally or in a method statement how they will do the work, for example:
 - whether roof sheets and skylights can be replaced from underneath;
 - what access equipment will be used;
 - if necessary, how they will get on and off the roof;
 - how falls through the roof will be prevented, eg using boards with guard rails;
 - how your own employees will be protected from falling material.
- Be prepared to stop the work if the contractors don't keep to their method statement or the work looks unsafe.

What can happen if these simple steps are ignored?

A self-employed contractor died when a plastic roof panel on a car port he was working on gave way and he fell just 2 m. The client, an estate agent, had failed to ensure that the work was planned and organised with the right equipment, or that the contractor knew how to do the work safely. The client was prosecuted and fined £75,000 and had to pay over £11,000 costs.

What can happen if these simple steps are ignored?

A 48-year-old worker died when he fell through the fragile roof of a warehouse to the concrete floor below. He had been cleaning the guttering. His employer had not provided any safety equipment to prevent falls. The client, a logistics firm, knew the roof was fragile, but ignored its own health and safety guidelines when allowing the work to continue. Both the client and the employer were prosecuted. The client was fined £250,000 and had to pay £20,000 costs. The employer received a four-month prison sentence, suspended for one year.

Some examples of safe systems of work



Replacing roof-light from below



Using a MEWP to inspect a vent



Cover preventing fall through skylight (image courtesy of Safesite)

Fee for Intervention

HSE now recovers the costs of time spent dealing with material breaches of health and safety law. This is known as Fee for Intervention (FFI). FFI generally applies when an inspector finds something wrong that they believe is serious enough for them to write to you about. A fee is charged for the time spent by the inspector in sorting it out. Following the simple guidance on this sheet may help you to avoid having to pay a fee.

This is just a summary – you can find out what else you need to know about health and safety at www.hse.gov.uk/construction

www.roofworkadvice.info Advisory Committee for Roofsafety (ACR)
www.roofworkadvice.info/html/is3-minor_roof_works.html

GEIS5 *Fragile roofs*
 INDG248(rev1) *Working on roofs*
 INDG401 *Working at height. A brief guide*
 INDG455 *Safe use of ladders and stepladders*

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The Working Well Together campaign aims to improve health and safety in the construction industry, particularly in small and micro businesses. For more information visit www.wwt.uk.com



This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory, unless specifically stated, and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance.