



a members' guide to
lone working



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Introduction

Many jobs require employees to work alone at some point, whether they are travelling on their own, for instance to attend training or visit clients, or for work in the field or at outside premises.

Lone working can take place in offices, laboratories, workshops and, in some cases, in private households. It can often be overlooked by employers: the last person to leave a workplace at night is a lone worker.

Lone working can often be a case of "out of sight, out of mind".

But many of the hazards that lone workers face are similar to those faced by other workers. However, the risks involved may be greater because the worker is on their own.

The law requires employers to think about and deal with any health and safety risks before people are set to work. In doing so, employers should ensure that lone workers are not placed at greater risk than colleagues who work alongside others.

1. Who are lone workers?

1.1 The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines lone workers as: “those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision”. This could be for short periods or whole shifts, in or outside of normal working hours. Many roles can require people to be alone and isolated in a range of workplaces and environments.

1.2 Roles that involve lone working generally fall into two categories:

- in fixed establishments where the worker is the only person on the premises, works separately from others or outside normal hours
- mobile employees working away from their fixed base, such as installation, maintenance and repair workers, those working in vehicle recovery, researchers or agricultural and forestry workers.

2. Employers' legal responsibilities

2.1 There are no laws that relate specifically to lone working. However, there are general laws which cover all employees in all circumstances. The two most important are:

- **The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974** – this places general duties on employers to ensure that employees and others who are affected by work activities are not placed at risk, in so far as is reasonably practicable. It outlines requirements for developing safe systems of work and health and safety policies; providing information, training and instruction; and a safe working environment.
- **The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999** – require employers to carry out a “suitable and sufficient” assessment of risks faced by employees and make arrangements for keeping employees safe and healthy through effective planning, organisation, control, monitoring and review of arrangements.

2.2 Employers have responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of their employees while they are working, and the health and safety of those affected by their work activities, such as visitors, contractors and self-employed people. These responsibilities cannot be transferred to people who work alone.

2.3 It remains the employer's duty to assess

risks to lone workers (see section 3) and take steps to avoid or control risk where this can sensibly be done. Employees must take reasonable care of themselves and others affected by their work and co-operate with their employers in meeting their legal obligations. But employers must not leave it to employees themselves to anticipate and plan how to keep themselves safe when they are working alone.

2.4 Employers have a legal duty to notify and consult health and safety representatives about the safety of employees who work alone. Health and safety reps are a valuable source of information and advice for helping to identify hazards and control measures.

3. Risk assessment

3.1 The risk assessment required by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations performs two key tasks. It will:

- determine whether the work can be done safely by a single person
- consider what arrangements are needed to ensure the lone worker is at no more risk than other employees.

3.2 Employers should carry out a risk assessment before employees start lone working – but this may not always happen. In this situation, when employers carry out the assessment, they will need to identify all lone workers by taking stock of the roles and responsibilities of workers across the organisation.

3.3 The risk assessment must identify:

- the things that could cause the lone workers harm (the hazards)
- establish how these hazards may harm them
- work out how likely it is that this harm will arise (the risk), and
- implement measures to reduce the risk.

This process should be documented, made available to staff if there are five or more employees and periodically reviewed to make sure it is still relevant and accurate.

3.4 Employers should follow the “hierarchy of control” when implementing control

measures. This means giving priority to measures that will be more effective and protect groups of people, rather than just individuals.

3.5 Employers should therefore first consider whether they can remove the risk altogether. If they can't, they should evaluate whether – in order of priority – they should:

- replace the hazard with something less dangerous
- isolate people from the hazard
- change the way people carry out the work, or
- provide workers with personal protective equipment (PPE).

3.6 Because lone workers should not be put at any more risk than other employees, employers may need to implement extra measures to control the risks lone workers face.

3.7 Risk assessments should only be carried out by members of staff who are qualified to assess risk and have an in-depth knowledge of the job or task in question. This “competent person” can be either one person or a team of people. The risk assessor should speak to health and safety reps and members of staff who do the job or task.

Is it safe for one person?

3.8 The risk assessment will establish whether

it is safe for a person to carry out a job or task alone and, if it is, the level of supervision that is necessary. The HSE says that when workers carry out high-risk activities, at least one other person should be involved. Examples given include working in a confined space, where a supervisor may need to be present, along with someone dedicated to the rescue role; and working at or near exposed live electricity conductors. If a task is considered unsuitable to perform unaccompanied, employers should ensure that staff do not perform it alone.

3.9 Under the principles of the hierarchy of control, employers should first consider whether alternatives to lone working can be used, ie can the work be done in a different way, at a different time or by using more than one person?

3.10 Using more than one worker may increase costs, for example, but may be “reasonably practicable” when the risks are taken into account. Cost-cutting or rationalisation exercises should not put members at risk by forcing them to work alone.

Hazards faced by lone workers

3.11 As already mentioned, the hazards facing lone workers will be similar to those of their colleagues who work with others, but employers need to think through the particular consequences that these hazards

pose to those working alone. The risk assessment may highlight issues such as:

Work location

3.12 What risks are posed to the lone worker by the location where the work takes place? Is there safe access and egress for one person? Employers should consider whether one person can safely handle any temporary access equipment, such as portable ladders and trestles, or any plant, substances and tools needed for the work.

3.13 The risk assessment should also reflect whether employees are likely to work in remote locations where they may not be able to access services or mobile phone reception. Employers must ensure there is a safe means of travel to and from the workplace; there are procedures to assess the time it will take to do the work; how frequently the employee should report in and what will happen if they don't; and that employees have access to toilets, rest, refreshment and first aid equipment.

Violence

3.14 Lone workers can be targets for violence and abuse. Statistics from the British Crime Survey indicate that as many as 150 lone workers are attacked every day. If violence is likely to be an issue, a separate policy should be developed and the lone worker made aware of the employer's strategy. Violence should be taken to include any risk of violence, including

verbal abuse, threatening behaviour and assault. Women working alone may be at risk of verbal and sexual harassment.

3.15 Other violence-related issues should be considered by the lone working risk assessment, such as identifying residential areas with a record of high personal crimes such as robbery or violence, although some lone workers may not be able to avoid such areas. In addition:

- the threat of theft should be considered
- staff should be advised whether to abandon or hand over equipment to avoid violence
- if lone workers meet members of the public in their homes, or at another employer's premises, they should be trained to handle difficult clients, and
- staff should be informed of procedures for reporting violent and aggressive incidents so that the employer is aware of their extent and occurrence. A procedure also needs to be in place for staff to alert their employer and the police if they are attacked.

Weather

3.16 How will the weather affect staff working outside? Fieldworkers, surveyors, researchers and other groups are likely to be affected while out in the field, for example by wet or icy conditions. As with any employee working in adverse conditions, employers may need

to provide staff with PPE, warm clothing or suitable footwear such as ice grips. Shorter daylight hours may mean that field workers need to be provided with effective lighting equipment.

Hazardous substances

3.17 Will the lone worker use hazardous substances? If so, employers have an additional duty to carry out a risk assessment under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 before any employee starts work. The risk assessment should take account of special risks faced by lone workers, such as whether they are able to handle the substances safely, and those associated with out of hours working.

Homeworking

3.18 Is the lone worker also a homeworker? Employer obligations towards employees extend to homeworkers and a risk assessment of the work activities carried out by homeworkers must be carried out. If the homeworker mainly works on a computer, then the steps the employer will need to take to protect them will be similar to other employees using display screen equipment (DSE).

3.19 However, homeworkers are at risk of feeling isolated, which is a source of stress, so employers will need to think about how to address this, for example by keeping in regular

contact with them. See Prospect's members' guides to homeworking (<http://bit.ly/prospect-homeworking>) or preventing stress (see below).

Stress

3.20 How stressful will the work be for the lone worker? Isolation from colleagues is a common problem for lone workers, especially homeworkers, and should be addressed by the employer. For more information, see Prospect's guide to preventing workplace stress, at <http://bit.ly/prospect-stress>

Other employers' premises

3.21 Is the lone worker required to work on another employer or customer's premises? Where this happens, the host employer or customer should inform the lone worker's employer of any risks and the control measures in place. The employer should be satisfied that these control measures are adequate before the lone worker begins work.

Driving

3.22 Does the lone worker spend long periods driving alone? The main risks are breaking down in an isolated area and fatigue. Driving at work remains the responsibility of the employer and appropriate action must be taken for those who drive as part of the job. See Prospect's members' guide to safer driving at <http://bit.ly/prospect-driving>

Emergencies

3.23 Procedures should be in place to deal with foreseeable emergencies, such as the lone worker becoming ill, having an accident, equipment failure or fire. Lone workers should be prepared and equipped with sufficient resources to deal with emergencies. To cope with them:

- staff should be trained in the necessary emergency procedures and have access to adequate first aid
- mobile workers should carry a first aid kit suitable for treating minor injuries
- some lone workers may need training in first aid, survival techniques or other relevant skills
- the ease with which emergency services are able to reach the isolated area must be considered
- where appropriate, clothing and equipment should be provided to deal with adverse weather conditions, such as heavy snowfall or sub-freezing temperatures, and
- staff should be briefed on how and when they should report an attack to their employer and at what point the police should be involved.

Dynamic risk assessment

3.24 Employers who set employees to work in uncertain situations or environments sometimes require them to carry out dynamic

risk assessments. This is the practice of observing, assessing and analysing an environment as we work, making operational decisions about risk and how to control it. This is predicated on the assumption that some hazards are not foreseeable or beyond an employer's control.

3.25 Sometimes it is genuinely not possible to anticipate in advance the risks that will arise in the course of, for example, working in the field or in other people's homes. However, most risks are foreseeable and dynamic risk assessments are not a substitute for a thorough, pre-emptive risk assessment.

3.26 Employees who are expected to carry out dynamic risk assessments must be thoroughly trained in how to identify and mitigate risks. The employer must provide a sound rationale for requiring employees to carry out these types of assessment. They should not be used as an excuse for employers to transfer responsibility to the employee.

Fitness to work alone

3.27 Employers should check whether reasonable adjustments can be made to deal with medical conditions which could affect the lone worker's ability to do the job.

3.28 Where there is any doubt, a health assessment should be carried out before lone working begins and at regular intervals thereafter. Potential limitations should be

discussed with the worker. Consideration should be given to both routine work and potential emergencies.

3.29 Equally, employees who work alone should inform their line manager of any medical condition which could affect their work. However, a medical condition does not mean that employees should automatically be excluded from lone working. Discussion with the employee is vital in order to set realistic parameters for the work, identify potential problems and put appropriate control measures in place.

4. Training and information

4.1 Lone workers should be provided with suitable training to allow them to carry out their work safely and to ensure they are capable of dealing with uncertain situations.

They should:

- be given information and training on the procedures to follow in the event of an emergency
- have access to adequate first aid facilities
- have information about hazards, how to identify them and action that can be taken to avoid them.

4.2 Employers should set the parameters for what can, and cannot, be done while working alone. Any guidance on lone working should set out various procedures, such as emergency assistance, and advise that such procedures should be tested in practice. As appropriate, training should cover:

- the use of permits to work
- the use of any personal protective equipment provided and its limitations, and
- the correct operation of all work equipment and its limitations and scope.

4.3 Training must include guidance on how employees should behave in circumstances that are new, unusual or beyond the scope of the training, eg when to stop work and seek advice from a supervisor.

5. Supervision

5.1 Employers have a duty to exercise appropriate control of the work, despite the lack of continuing supervision of lone workers. Supervision complements information, instruction and training. It helps to ensure that employees understand the risks associated with their work and that the necessary precautions are carried out. It can also provide guidance in uncertain situations.

5.2 The extent of supervision required depends on the risks involved and the capacity and experience of individuals to identify and handle them. The higher the risk, the greater level of supervision required. For example, anyone new to the job, undergoing training, doing a job which presents special risks or dealing with new situations may need to be accompanied.

5.3 The extent of supervision required is a management decision, made in consultation with the lone worker. Individuals should not be left to decide whether they need help.

5.4 Procedures to monitor lone workers to ensure their safety need to be in place. Suitable procedures include:

- visits from supervisors or managers to staff working alone
- maintaining regular contact between workers and supervisors
- checks to ensure a lone worker has returned to their base or home once their task is completed
- providing automatic warning devices which operate if signals are not received at specified times from lone workers, and
- other devices to raise the alarm which can be operated manually or which are activated automatically (see specialist lone worker devices section below).

Communication and monitoring

5.5 It may be important for employers to have effective mechanisms to communicate with staff working alone in the field. The risk assessment must consider what communications methods are available, whether they are sufficient and how they will operate. Organisations can develop a range of systems depending on requirements, such as:

- keeping a log sheet which gives information about where staff will work during the day, estimated time of return to office/home, contact details etc
- buddy systems, where colleagues keep tabs on each other's movements and make contact at prearranged times. Some organisations offer an automated system which can be operated at the discretion of the employee. It is the employer's responsibility to set up a buddy system
- supervisors periodically visiting and observing people working alone, and
- requiring field staff staying away overnight to brief the accommodation owners of their intended time of return and to leave clear written instructions.

5.6 A variety of equipment can help to maintain lines of communication, such as personal mobile phones, satellite communication systems or mobile radios.

5.7 Each has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the task and the environment. For example, mobile phone signal is unreliable in certain parts of the UK; personal radios need to be in range of a base station in order to work.

5.8 If you work alone and have concerns that your communication equipment means you may be unable to make contact with others in an emergency, raise it with your line manager or health and safety rep.

Specialist lone worker devices

5.9 Many employers provide lone workers with highly-reliable devices that will enable them to make contact with others in an emergency. These devices are usually provided to people working alone in the field when the risk assessment shows that other types of communication equipment are unsuitable, for example because they are impractical in the work environment or may not work when needed.


5.10 These devices come in a variety of forms, including mobile phone apps, discrete devices disguised as ID tags, hand-held satellite systems, key fobs and wearable technology such as watches. Some lone worker devices

connect to a control centre, so staff can be remotely monitored and supported if necessary. However, some devices simply produce an audible alarm to alert others in the vicinity.

5.11 Lone worker devices have a range of functions, some of which can be incorporated into the communications equipment mentioned above. If employers choose to purchase a lone worker device for employees after carrying out a risk assessment, they must take into account the nature of the work being undertaken, because certain functions will only be appropriate in certain situations. For instance, a device that produces audible signals will offer little additional protection to people working alone in their usual workplace but outside normal hours.

5.12 Typical functions of lone worker devices include:

- Fall alert function – automatically sends an alert to a control centre when the user has not moved for a period of time or if the device is positioned in a different angle than usual for defined period of time.
- Manual alert – allows users to notify or connect to the control centre or another person for remote monitoring in an emergency or simply to provide a status update.
- GPS – allows the user to be located by an authorised colleague or control centre.
- Duress alarm – the method of triggering



an alert can be disguised, such as pressing the phone's power button or shaking the device, allowing the user to trigger an alert without aggravating a confrontational situation. Some devices also offer the functionality of appearing as though an alert has been cancelled.

- Impact detection – automatically detects a fall by recognising the quick motion of the device followed by an impact.

6. Reviewing procedures

6.1 Procedures for lone working should be regularly updated and reassessed to check that the work has not changed significantly.

6.2 Control measures for lone workers should be audited to ensure their effectiveness. The interval between reviews will depend on the nature of the risks and the likelihood of changes in work activity.

6.3 Accident data and incident reports provide useful indicators of the adequacy of controls. Audits provide the means to review control measures and identify where changes are needed to maintain the integrity of the safe working system.

6.4 Risk assessments should be reviewed whenever their validity is questioned and especially after a serious, or potentially serious, incident.

6.5 Any review should include feedback from the lone workers themselves as to how effective policies are in practice. Health and safety representatives should be involved at all stages of this review process.

7. Health and safety representatives

7.1 Employers are required to consult the workforce on health and safety matters. Union health and safety representatives are a valuable source of information and advice for making workplaces safer and healthier.

7.2 Health and safety representatives have rights to influence conditions for lone workers – just as they have for any other work activity. They should:

- be consulted/negotiate on the necessity for lone working in the first instance
 - ensure that a proper risk assessment is carried out, including the provision of training, information and supervision
 - ask to see the risk assessment if they have concerns about their employer's management of lone working
 - check that all accidents, near misses and dangerous occurrences are entered in the accident book and properly investigated, and encourage members to report
 - advise members of safe working practices
 - present suggestions and complaints from lone workers to the employer
 - make sure that work practices are not introduced unless specified in the risk assessment or permit to work
 - obtain support from their local Prospect branch if safe working practices are not established and refer these to enforcement authorities if necessary
 - check that risk assessments are reviewed regularly
- check that violent incidents are monitored and staff given support as necessary
 - check that staff receive relevant training
 - check that the local branch or section keeps in touch with lone workers who are also homeworkers, and
 - use routine inspections or undertake special inspections to speak to members about lone working.

8. Further reading

- Prospect's guide to preventing work-related stress:
<http://bit.ly/prospect-stress>
- HSE guide – Working alone, health and safety guidance on the risks of lone working:
<http://bit.ly/hse-working-alone>
- HSE simple online guide to lone working:
<http://bit.ly/hse-lone-working>
- TUC – Lone working – a guide for safety representatives:
<http://bit.ly/tuc-lone-working>
- Personal safety charity Suzy Lamplugh Trust:
www.suzylamplugh.org



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