



# Keeping People Safe

CHURCH HEALTH & SAFETY TOOLKIT

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## LADDERS



## Ladders and stepladders

Ladders and stepladders are commonly used in churches. There is no ban on this and they offer a practical option for low risk, short duration tasks.

However, ladders can pose a significant risk of injury if they are not used properly. There can be a temptation to use them even if they are not quite right for the job or to just get things done quickly. Therefore, it is essential that basic safety precautions are taken when ladders are used.

This note deals with pole, extension and portable ladders including stepladders. It does not include roof ladders, where additional precautions are usually required.

Fixed ladders are also common in many churches and you may need to meet a number of specific safety requirements. You will need to check these should you have one. For example, you may have to provide safety hoops or a permanently fixed fall arrest system depending on your circumstances.

## Legal requirements

Generally, if someone is injured you may need to show that you have met your duty of care.

In addition to this, you may have to comply with other duties set out in the Safety, Health, & Welfare At Work (General Application) Regulations, Part 4: Work At Height. This will be where you are an employer or have control of work completed by others. If you control the work, you will only need to comply with the requirements to the extent of your control.

For ladders, the Regulations require that:

- If you are an employer, they are only used where a risk assessment shows that this is appropriate
- Surfaces supporting them are safe (i.e. stable, firm etc.)
- They are positioned to ensure their stability
- Portable ladders are prevented from slipping (by adequately tying-off the stiles at the upper end; using anti-slip or other stability devices etc.)
- They extend sufficiently above any landing place, unless there is provision for an adequate hand-hold
- Interlocking or extension ladders are only used if their sections can be prevented from moving relative to each other while in use
- Mobile ladders are prevented from moving before being stepped on
- Where a ladder (or run of ladders) extends a vertical distance of 9m or more above its base, then sufficient safe landing areas or rest platforms are provided at suitable intervals
- They are used in such a way as to ensure they provide a secure handhold/support at all times for users and that a safe handhold can be maintained when carrying a load (although there are additional considerations in this respect when using stepladders).

Other additional requirements might also apply (e.g. where work equipment – such as a ladder – is used, the Use of Work Equipment Regulations would also apply) in some circumstances.

Even if you are not an employer, you must still make sure that any equipment (including any ladder) you provide for use by others is safe.



## Hazards to look out for

Typical hazards include:

- Ladders and stepladders being used when safer options would be more appropriate (e.g. completing the work from ground level, using a scaffold tower)
- Ladders and stepladders that are unsuitable (e.g. too short) or defective (e.g. missing or broken rungs, damaged stiles)
- Using equipment incorrectly (e.g. not in accordance with manufacturer's instructions, design or load capabilities; standing on the top rung, stretching or leaning too far)
- Failing to have appropriate weighting at the foot of the ladder or not having it tied securely at the top
- Inadequate information or training for those required to use them
- Ladders and stepladders poorly stored, particularly if unauthorised users have access to them
- Unauthorised alterations to equipment (e.g. ladders should not be painted as this can hide defects)
- Inadequate lighting
- Contact with overhead electricity lines
- Adverse weather making work at height unsafe (e.g. high winds, snow and ice)\*.

\*Note: this list is not exhaustive

## Precautions you can take

Typical precautions include:

- Avoiding the need for work at height in the first place (say, completing it from ground level)
- Ensuring that work is properly planned in advance taking account of any safety precautions that are needed
- Using existing places at height (e.g. galleries) to work from where these are suitable (i.e. they have safe access, protected edges etc.)
- Choosing ladders and stepladders that meet recognised standards (e.g. EN 131)
- Making sure that ladders are suitable for the job (e.g. long enough)
- Providing information and training on the safe use of ladders
- Using ladders made of non-conductive material near to overhead electricity lines
- Making sure no work at height is carried out when there are adverse weather conditions
- Making sure access equipment is inspected for wear or damage before use and periodically thereafter and is properly maintained\*.

\*Note: this list is not exhaustive

## Making a start

### Action

1. Identify circumstances where work at height may require the use of ladders and any fixed ladders you may have for access between floor

2. Where you use portable ladders or stepladders, check their use is justified

Make a note of the reasons for this.

3. Check the precautions you have taken are adequate. If they are not, identify any additional ones that are needed.

Make a note of the precautions in place and/or any additional ones that might be required.

Also, note who will be responsible for taking them.

### Guidance

If you are an employer you will need to complete formal risk assessments.

These should help you identify circumstances where work at height may require the use of ladders or where there are any fixed ladders for access between floors

You will need to do this if you are an employer. The risk assessments you complete should help you with this.

Where practicable, it is better to avoid working at height (e.g. completing the work from ground level using extendable tools). This is not always possible in a church and ladders or stepladders might be more practical. You may need to show that this is acceptable. Normally, this would be because of the low risk associated with the work and the short duration of their use or there are existing features in your church that cannot be altered e.g. the presence of fixed pews

As a guide, 'short duration' means having to stay up the ladder for less than 30 minutes at a time. This is not the only factor you will need to consider, as ladders must only be used where they will be level, stable and properly secured.

Fixed ladders used for access between floors should only be used where a conventional staircase cannot be accommodated and their use is considered safe. You will need to think about persons who will be carrying loads whilst using the ladder.

Again, where you have completed formal risk assessments, these will do this for you. They will also provide a useful record of the steps you have taken to identify any necessary precautions.

Typical precautions are set out above. You can use this list to help decide if any further precautions are necessary. These will vary depending on your particular circumstances.

*Continued overleaf*

## Making a start

### Guidance continued

For portable ladders, precautions will include proper:

- **Selection** – any ladder must be the right type for the job and suitable (i.e. strong, robust and long enough) for its intended use. It should comply with relevant standards (usually EN 131). Where it is not new, only equipment which has been adequately inspected and properly maintained should be used.
- **Use** – any ladder needs to be in a safe condition, having no visible defects. This should involve checking them before use and regularly thereafter. Users will also need to take precautions, including those necessary to prevent overreaching or overloading through to ensuring that the equipment is properly positioned, footed and/or secured. Ladders and associated equipment needs to be adequately stored when not in use.
- **Maintenance** – ladders must be properly maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Unauthorised alterations of the equipment should be prohibited with defects being reported and repaired promptly.

Stepladders are suitable for small jobs of short duration where it is not possible to rest a ladder against a wall or other support. They should only be used for minor maintenance at low levels. The stepladder should have an 'A' frame with a small working platform at the top which can be used to hold tools and materials. The platform should never be used to stand on. There must be a mechanism to prevent the legs from spreading out and a safety catch to prevent the joint opening. They must be placed on firm, level ground. The height of the steps should not exceed three times the width of the base.

## Making a start

### Action

4. Ensure that the precautions you have identified are taken and remain in place for as long as is necessary.

Make a note of any checks or inspections you make to ensure these precautions are being taken or equipment remains safe.

5. Ensure that ladders will not be used when weather conditions make this unsafe.

6. Ensure that employees (and volunteers in these circumstances) know how to use the ladders safely.

Make a note of any information or training that is provided to individuals.

7. Document your arrangements and responsibilities for using ladders.

Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid.

Retain records of the notes you have made in the steps outlined above.

### Guidance

Where portable ladders are used, you may also need other precautions to guard against falling materials or objects; prevent unauthorised access to work areas; provide adequate lighting; ensure safety around overhead services and/or equipment etc.

Ensure that pre-use checks are completed by those using the ladder. They may need information and training on how to do this. Also ensure that regular, detailed visual inspections of the equipment are carried out in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions - these must be completed by a competent person and recorded by them.

For most churches, tasks are usually low-risk. Here, making sure employees and volunteers receive simple instruction on how to use the equipment safely would be sufficient. In many cases, an understanding of the user instructions affixed to the equipment would be enough.

All persons required to inspect, repair and maintain equipment should be provided with appropriate training and information.

If you have prepared a Safety Statement record these as part of it.

In the event of a claim, paperwork will be important. So, where ladders are used, you should retain the records mentioned. Where you prepare other documentation you should keep this as well. This could include **information gathered at the scene of the accident** (e.g. sketches/photographs; witnesses statements); investigation documents (e.g. accident book); or **specific health and safety documents** (e.g. risk assessments; records of maintenance, inspections and other checks; records of information and training provided; policy etc.).

## Want to know more?

We have produced other useful resources to help you get started or simply check the adequacy of what you have already done. All are available at [www.ecclesiastical.ie/risk-management](http://www.ecclesiastical.ie/risk-management)

Further guidance and resources are also available at: [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie) in particular the leaflet **'Using Ladders Safely Information Sheet**

## Need to contact us?

If you would like to speak to someone about health and safety in churches you can

**Call our Risk Management Team on 01 619 0300**  
(Monday to Friday, 09.00 to 17.00 - excluding Bank Holidays)

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