



**GMB Guide to**

# Working Alone

# Working Alone

Many members of the GMB work in jobs where they have to work alone without colleagues or direct supervision. This can increase the risk to their health and safety. There can also be additional problems if the unexpected – such as fire, equipment failure, accidents or illness – occurs.

## Working Alone – Lone Working

People who work alone without interaction with other workers or without direct supervision are known as lone workers. Lone workers include those who:

- work outside normal hours e.g. cleaners and security workers
- work away from their base e.g. maintenance or utility workers
- work separately from others e.g. in warehouses or automated factories
- are the only person on the premises e.g. in petrol stations and kiosks
- work outside in the community e.g. traffic wardens and gardeners
- visit people in their homes e.g. care workers

## Working Alone – What does the law say?

Employers have the same responsibilities towards staff who work alone as they have to all workers. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act they must ensure the health safety and welfare of employees so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes providing a safe workplace, safe access and a safe system of work.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations require employers to carry out risk assessments and reduce any risks identified. They must also provide information and training to staff. Other regulations specify that first aid and welfare provision should be made.

There are some very high risk activities such as working in confined spaces; electrical work near live conductors and fumigation work where there may be a prohibition on working alone. There are also some special restrictions on young workers working alone.

## Assessing the Risks of Working Alone

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations say employers must assess health and safety risks to identify what they need to do to reduce them. Safety representatives should ensure they are consulted about the assessments. They should question whether the work can be done safely by one person and what arrangements there are to ensure lone workers are not at greater risk than other workers.

*The risk assessment should take account of:*

- the hazards and risks of the job
- any extra risks which may occur because employees are working alone
- foreseeable emergencies e.g. fire, equipment failure, illness and accidents

*Questions to be asked include:*

- Is the way in and out of (or to and from) the workplace safe?
- Can temporary access equipment e.g. ladders, be handled safely?
- Can all plant, substances and goods be handled safely by one person?
- Is there a risk of violence?
- Are women especially at risk?
- Are young workers especially at risk?

- Is the lone worker medically fit and suitable to work alone?
- What training is required to ensure competency in safety matters?
- How will the lone worker be supervised?
- What are the arrangements for maintaining communication?
- What are the arrangements for communication in an emergency?
- How will the welfare needs of staff, such as rest facilities, be provided?
- Have those who only work alone for part of their day been covered?

Where the risk assessment shows that it is not possible for the work to be done safely by one person, arrangements for doubling up, providing help or backup should be put in place.

## Reducing the Risks of Working Alone

A range of precautions will be needed to reduce the risks of working alone.

### Training and information

Health and safety training is critical where workers have to work alone. Workers must be told about the risks of their work and also precautions such as:

- what can and cannot be done when working alone
- how to deal with unusual circumstances
- when to stop work and seek advice from a supervisor
- how to use any communications equipment provided
- the procedures for checking back to base
- what to do in the event of an emergency



**The Health and Safety Executive says that “lone workers should not be at more risk than other employees” and that extra safety measures may be needed.**

### **Supervision and communications**

Supervision plays a role in ensuring the health safety and welfare of employees. The level should be based on the findings of risk assessment. The higher the risk, the greater the level of supervision needed. Procedures are needed to monitor lone workers to see they remain safe. Examples include:

- a system for communicating back to base using telephone or radio
- devices to raise the alarm in the event of an emergency
- checks that the worker has returned to their base or home on finishing the job

### **Incident Reporting**

Incident reporting is important to help get an accurate picture of any potential risks from lone working. Systems for reporting incidents should be easy and staff should be encouraged to report **all** incidents that occur and also any other health and safety concerns they may have.

### **First Aid**

Access to adequate first aid facilities should be arranged. Mobile workers may need to carry a first aid kit suitable for treating minor injuries.

### **Welfare facilities**

Arrangements need to be made so that staff have access to facilities for rest breaks.

### **Manual handling**

When people work alone they may be at increased risk of back injury and other musculo-skeletal problems. Preventative measures include: identifying tasks that should not be carried out unless more than one worker is present; training staff to make on the spot evaluations of any risks and leaving equipment at outreach premises rather than taking it each time.

### **Violence and aggression**

People who work alone can be particularly vulnerable to violence. Safety measures should include staff being encouraged to walk away from situations they consider unsafe without negative repercussions.

### **Home visits or working in a remote location**

Working in these situations can lead to additional risks. Where it cannot be avoided, safety measures such as: two workers making the initial visit and prior information on the person and area to be visited should be implemented.

### **Working at height**

Working at height is a major cause of deaths and accidents at work. Extra precautions and supervision are likely to be necessary if lone workers have to work at height.

### **Fire**

Lone workers may be at particular risk if a fire breaks out in the workplace. For example if they fail to hear an alarm. Specific arrangements may need to be made and drills should cover this eventuality.

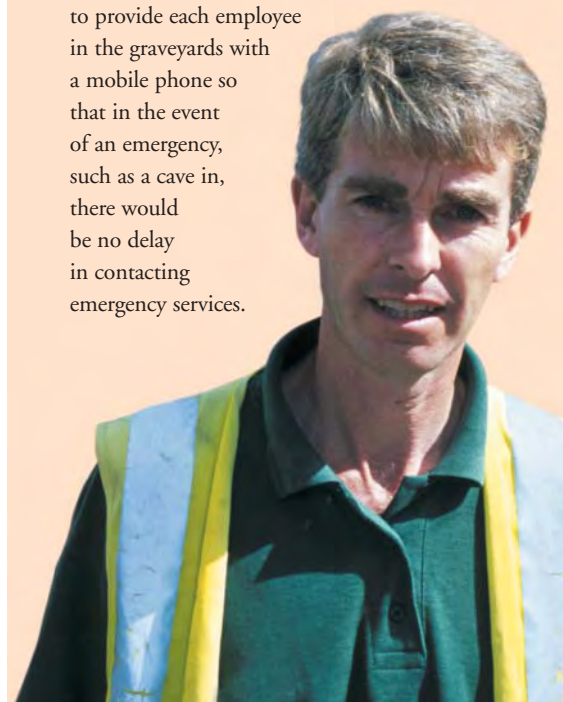
### **Stress**

Working alone and in isolation particularly where there may be a threat of violence and aggression can be very stressful. Safety measures should include regular communication and meetings with staff.

## **GMB Safety Reps in Action**

**The following are examples of where GMB Safety Representatives have negotiated to make lone workers safer.**

- Safety reps at Lincoln City Council negotiated for short-wave radios to be used to improve security for car park patrol attendants
- Safety reps at N.A.G. identified a special risk for lone workers and a subsequent risk assessment led to changes in work design to ensure two people work together.
- Lone working procedures have been put in place at Kingston Business Communications so that engineers call control after each job to ensure their well being.
- The safety rep at South Lanarkshire Council persuaded management to provide each employee in the graveyards with a mobile phone so that in the event of an emergency, such as a cave in, there would be no delay in contacting emergency services.



## Five Steps to Risk Assessment on Lone Working

1. Identify the hazards – look at the hazards of the job and the hazards that can arise from lone working.
2. Identify those at risk – remember to include those who may only work alone for part of their day.
3. Evaluate the risks and decide whether existing precautions are adequate or what more needs to be done – remember to get lone workers' views on what needs to be done.
4. Record the findings.
5. Review the findings – this should be done periodically to take into account any new information.

## Legal Case

In a recent case on lone working in a retail outlet, a judge in Scotland found that an employee suffered as a result of her employer's policy on double manning. The employee who was left traumatised after being roughly threatened with a knife was awarded £179,000 in compensation.

The judge criticised the firm's failure to take reasonable care and introduce double manning. In his summary he said that the firm's "policy on double manning had little to do with the safety of their staff, but was based on economic considerations."

## Safety Reps Checklist

- Is there a policy/guidelines on lone working at your workplace?
- Does your employer follow the HSE guidance on working alone safely?
- Has your employer carried out a risk assessment for all situations where lone working occurs?
- Has the risk of violence when working alone been specifically assessed?
- Have you been consulted on measures to reduce any risks of lone working?
- Are the procedures for protecting lone workers being carried out properly?
- Do lone workers receive specific training?
- Where panic buttons, personal alarms and two-way radio are provided have staff received adequate instruction in their use?
- Does your employer make sure that inexperienced staff are not left to cope alone?
- Are control staff available out of office hours?
- Have you talked with members about any concerns they have about working alone?
- Do you ensure that members report all incidents that occur when they work alone?
- Are you satisfied with the measures in place to protect lone workers?

## Join Your Union

To achieve health and safety improvements requires a strong union. If you work full time or part time, if you are a permanent member of staff or a temporary worker you need the protection that GMB membership brings.

If you are not yet a member of the GMB join today and ensure that your workplace is safer.

**Remember if you are not a member of the GMB we can't help you!**

Independent research has shown that people who are in a trade union are **50% less likely to have an accident** than those who are not in a trade union.

In other words:

**You are twice as safe in the GMB**



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The GMB is Britain's leading union for health and safety. We have 25,000 Safety Representative's who offer advice and help on health and safety problems. To back up our Representatives the GMB has a network of health and safety specialists in each of our 10 Regions. The union also has a large National Health and Safety Department providing advice and support to Safety Representative and the Regions. It is widely acknowledged that the GMB offers the best health and safety service of any trade union.