Making safety at height work

When choosing a mobile tower or scaffold tower, safety must be a priority – getting it wrong could cost a life.

There are few activities which are so easy to get right and paradoxically so easy to get wrong when working at height. Unfortunately, there are also few so seemingly innocuous activities which can have such life changing consequences when they get it wrong. By taking simple precautions you can prevent a fall, or at the very least prevent the sudden, bone-shattering stop which is the unerring consequence of a fall from height. No one deliberately sets out to fall from height, but there are many, many people on a daily basis who are prepared to take that risk. If the accident statistics don’t tell us much about the underlying causes, they unequivocally tell us that.

The prevention of falls begins in the planning stage when a thorough risk assessment should be carried out. There are many issues to be considered which all contribute to eliminating the ‘risk’ factor as much as possible, but the strategy dictated by the Work at Height Regulations must form the basis of any risk assessment, namely: avoidance, prevention and mitigation.

If it is necessary to work at height, the right choice of access equipment is essential. The HSE’s WAIT tool can provide valuable guidance on selecting the correct type of equipment (available at www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/wait/wait-tool.html). Your choice of equipment will largely be decided by the outcome of your risk assessment, taking into account a number of factors (see box).

Improving performance

A new product standard for low-level work platforms (LLWPs) – commonly referred to as pulps and podiums – has been introduced, replacing PAS 250:2012. BS 8620 further enhances safety and performance criteria with a dimensional change to side protection and modifications to specific tests. Prior to PAS 250, designs for LLWPs had been developed in the absence of a formal specification, and while the majority provided a safe solution to low-level access, there were some aspects that could be improved by relevant and specific design criteria which PAS 250 first introduced in 2012.

But the conversion of PAS 250 to a full British standard does not mean that existing PAS 250 compliant LLWPs are now obsolete. “Far from it,” says John Darby, chair of the technical committee of PASMA, the trade association for the mobile access tower industry. “You can continue to employ PAS 250 type-approved podiums and there is no necessity to change product immediately. You can introduce the upgrade when the time comes for replacement.”

BS 8620 compliant products should start to become available from April 2017 and users should update their procurement policies accordingly to guarantee that they are purchasing equipment that meets the very latest criteria for strength, access, stability and rigidity.

Support where it’s needed

The new standard has industry-wide backing. The steering group which first contributed to its development includes the Association of British Certification Bodies, the HSE, Hire Association Europe, the Ladder Association, PASMA and BuildUK. To assist purchasers and users over this transitional period, PASMA has introduced an informative fact sheet and FAQ section at www.pasma.co.uk/b8620

With thanks to PASMA for this article, which partners with industry, academia and professional bodies, promoting collaboration, innovation and the exchange of knowledge and information. IIRSM will be signing a Memorandum of Understanding with PASMA shortly.

Guide to using mobile towers

● Ensure you have the knowledge, experience and training necessary to build, inspect, use, move and dismantle a tower safely. Or take a course – there is a range of ‘industry standard’ courses catering for all levels of experience, from the essentials of work at height through to advanced modules such as working with towers on stairs and towers with cantilevers.

● Buy or hire your tower from an accredited supplier. This will ensure that your tower complies with the requirements of EN 1004, the European product standard for towers, and uses one of the two recognised safe methods for assembling and dismantling towers: Advance Guardrail (AGR) and Through the Trap (TT). Both methods ensure that nobody stands on an unprotected platform.

● Check that you have all the necessary components to build the tower, that they are compatible, and that they have been supplied complete with the manufacturer’s instructions. Always follow the specific instructions which can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer.

● Once the tower is built, make sure it is inspected by a competent person. It must be inspected (a) before it is first used (b) at suitable intervals depending on the environment and how it’s being used, and (c) every time something happens that may affect its stability or safety.

● You should also carry out a routine and documented inspection of the components of the tower. Do this when it’s unassembled, checking for deterioration, contamination and damage, otherwise you may not be able to check certain parts properly. Damaged components should be immediately segregated, marked and reported for attention, and repairs only carried out by the manufacturer or their approved agent. If the parts cannot be repaired by the manufacturer they must be destroyed and replaced.

● Good storage conditions are essential. If the equipment is stored outside in poor conditions and for extended periods, it will require more frequent inspection, more maintenance and probably earlier replacement.