

Unite - Working Alone Briefing



Is it legal to work alone - and is it safe? This is one of the most common health and safety questions raised by members.

Unite's aim is to avoid members being put at greater risk through working alone. The extent of the problem will depend on the risk involved and on the risk assessment that employers are required to make as part of their duties under the MHSW Regs. As the risk increases the problems of lone working require greater attention. But in legal terms, no simple answer applies in all circumstances.

Can people legally work alone?

While there is no specific legal prohibition on working alone, the general legal duties of employers still apply. They should identify the hazards of the work, assess the risks involved, and implement safe working arrangements to ensure the risks are either eliminated or adequately controlled. When it is not possible to devise arrangements for the work to be done safely by one person, alternative arrangements providing help or back-up have to be devised. It is also worth noting that many of the problems of lone working could also apply to pairs of workers who work in isolated areas.

Issues to be addressed

These are some of the issues which need special attention when questioning any proposals that are made for lone working. All of these must be addressed satisfactorily by employers. In the vast majority of cases, Unite believes that lone working should be considered unacceptable.

- **Can the risks of the job be adequately controlled** by one person or are more people necessary? Solitary workers should not be exposed to significantly more risks than employees who work together. Precautions should take account of normal working conditions and foreseeable emergency situations, eg, fire, equipment failure, illness and accidents.
- Does the workplace present a **special risks** to the solitary worker? Will moving machinery be involved, or chemicals?
- Is there **safe access and exit** for one person? Can one person safely handle any temporary access equipment, such as portable ladders or trestles?
- Can all the **plant, substances and goods** involved in the work be safely handled by one person? The work may involve lifting objects too large for one person, and more than one person may be necessary to operate essential controls for the safe running of equipment.
- Are **women** especially at risk if they work alone?
- Are **young workers** especially at risk if they work alone, due to immaturity, lack of knowledge or lack of experience?
- **Will social isolation for long periods increase stress** and mental pressures upon individuals?

- **Is the person medically fit** and suitable to work alone? Employers need to consider both routine work and foreseeable emergencies, which may impose additional physical and mental burdens on the individual.
- What **training** is needed?
- What **supervision** will there be?
- What **checks** will be made to ensure people are safe?
- What happens if there is an **accident or an emergency**?
- How are basic **first aid** requirements met? Where injuries are foreseeable then the absence of a colleague to administer or at least organise help could be construed as insufficient first aid cover.

All of these factors need to be considered when the prospect of lone working is raised. Employers have legal duties to provide safe working conditions. There is a clear onus on them not to create conditions that could put individual workers at risk.

Action points

1. Use your rights as a safety rep to be consulted in good time in advance of any moves to lone working.
2. Ensure that there is full discussion of all of the points raised above.
3. Contact your Regional Officer if employers seek to push lone working.