

Safe and secure

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The newly proposed working at height regulations are not just for the Health and Safety Department. Housing and procurement managers must be aware of their implications when using void security.

New Health & Safety Executives (HSE) regulations covering working at height could be implemented this October. They aim to satisfy targets for improving safety and the implementation of the European Union's Temporary Work at Height Directive. In housing, one area of service that will be affected by these changes on a daily basis is void security installations.

The installation of heavy steel security shutters has always been a safety risk, not only for the installers but also for residents in the neighbourhoods. Pushing a 2m wide and 1.5m high angle-iron steel screen up a ladder to the second storey of a void in high winds and sometimes in darkness should set anyone's heart racing! The risks are obvious. Falling from height due to the ladder slipping, over-balancing, falling through flat roofs or bay windows - and any fall has the prospect of the steel security screen falling back onto the installer. Injuries are commonplace as each operative could carry out a dozen installations or screen removals each day. Tiredness and the elements become a big factor and possibly its little more than luck that, despite several serious injuries, no fatality has occurred - yet.

The draft Working at Height Regulations and Guidance aim to tighten up this type of high-risk operation. However, it is essential that housing and procurement staff understand the implication of these regulations as they effect tendered service specifications, response and installation times and properties which can be secured at second storey level or above.

For example, when comparing the lowest cost bid in a tender process, is it commercially viable for the contractor to have three operatives - two up ladders - offering the steel screen up to the window with a third on the inside securing the screen with back-bars? Presently this activity is normally conducted by void teams with only two operatives. However, to strictly comply, five operatives could be necessary with two extra operatives 'footing' the ladders.

What about the use of safer access

equipment such as tower scaffolds? Do the specified response times take into account the contractors requirement to conduct risk assessments and inspect 'workplaces'? Can the contractor anchor the screen to prevent it injuring the operative or public should it fall? The list goes on.

The new regulations will make this process harder for both the contractor and landlord - but safer.

Key changes to consider are the regulations reference to 'fragile surfaces'. Bay windows and flat roofs are a useful support for operatives when installing steel screens but that surface is liable to fall. The limits of 'foreseeable loading' may not include two 16st fitters holding up a 50kg screen! And the roof is unlikely to be waterproof having taken that load. So another repair bill and a dissatisfied new tenant.

The ongoing requirement to prevent falling objects dictates that screens must be prevented from falling during the installation and throughout the void period. Normal installation methods result in screens being manually carried up to the void window. The screen is then secured using the back-bars to the void window by compression and its weight alone. However, weeks after installation and in high winds these screens can work loose with potentially fatal consequences.

Void contractors can work smart to overcome these regulations. The proper use of ropes, winches and other lifting equipment can eliminate or minimise the weight an operative must balance when ascending a ladder. Ladders can be anchored laterally to the building - if the landlord is prepared to accept the placing of fixings in the brickwork. Some contractors utilise lightweight screens for second storey installations so removing much of the risk.

The new regulations must be welcomed as they should make the void security operatives life safer...and longer. The onus is upon the landlord to let realistic contracts for this high-risk work considering what level of resource is commercially and operationally acceptable.

Above all, the void security contractors should work together to set out good practice for second storey installations while it can still boast being 'fatality free'. ■