

# WORKING

PROTECTING SOLITARY WORKERS FROM THE RISKS OF THE JOB

HAZARDS FACTSHEET 72

We live in a 24:7 world. Care workers, shopworkers, maintenance workers, most jobs can require people to be left alone, isolated. It can be dangerous. Workers have been murdered. Health, postal, emergency and shopworkers are frequently attacked. Injured workers have been undiscovered for hours. The law should protect you... make sure it does.



# ALONE

HSE says that "establishing safe working for lone workers is no different from organising the safety of other employees."

Questions HSE says should be answered by employers include:

- ◆ Can the risks of the job be adequately controlled by one person?
- ◆ Is there a risk of violence?
- ◆ Are women especially at risk if they work alone?
- ◆ Are young workers especially at risk if they work alone?
- ◆ Is the person medically fit and suitable to work alone?
- ◆ What training is required to ensure competency in safety matters?
- ◆ How will the person be supervised?
- ◆ What happens if a person becomes ill, has an accident, or there is an emergency.

UNISON's guide adds that employers are also under a legal duty to provide:

- ◆ Facilities for first aid under the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations
- ◆ Welfare under the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations
- ◆ Suitable equipment and training in its use under the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations and the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations.

RIDDOR duties to record accidents, injuries and violent incidents also apply. For all jobs, the laws that apply to other exposed workers apply to the lone worker - confined spaces, electricity, VDU and other laws, for example.

## Additional measures

*Working together: Eliminating the hazards of working alone*, a guide from the Canadian public service union CUPE, says a number of additional safeguards can be used:

- ◆ **Buddy system:** A second person is assigned to work with the first, because the job cannot be done safely alone.
- ◆ **Communications:** Telephones and walkie-talkies can be a lifeline in some cases.

**Electronic and visual monitors:** If introduced through proper negotiation these can offer some protection. Personal alarm security systems (PASS) can also help.

**Alarms:** Many counter, service and care workers have access to panic buttons. A range of other emergency, personal distress and violent attack alarms are available.

## Not alone yet...

The TUC *Hazards at Work* guide gives these pointers to safety reps.

- ◆ Don't allow cost cutting exercises to put members at risk by forcing them to work alone.
- ◆ Ensure risk assessments identify lone working on and off site and potential hazards.
- ◆ People should work in pairs at difficult or out the way sites including home and community visits. Safe completion of jobs should be reported.
- ◆ Records of staff whereabouts should be kept.
- ◆ Information on high risk geographical areas or jobs should be given to staff, particularly new members. The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has insisted that postal and telecom workers work in pairs in areas known to have a high risk of violence.
- ◆ Personal alarms or two way radios should be provided where appropriate. NATFHE has negotiated rape alarms for women workers working outside normal hours at colleges.
- ◆ Re-organise the way jobs are done to provide a safer system of work.
- ◆ Review procedures regularly to make sure they are working.
- ◆ The necessity for handling cash or dangerous materials should be reassessed.

All accidents, near misses, and incidents of violence should be recorded and studied at regular intervals to prevent further occurrences.

## Resources

### HSE publications

*Working alone in safety*. Free pamphlet, ref. INDG73(rev).

*COSHH and the peripatetic worker*. Free leaflet HS(G)77 1992. £4.00.

*Homeworking: guidance for employers and employees on health and safety*. 1996. Leaflet, ref. IND(G)226. Single copies free. £5.00 for pack of 15. HSE also published free leaflets and guidance on other hazards that may apply - confined space work, electricity regulations, violence at work, and risk assessment.

All from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 6FS. Tel: 01787 881165.

Fax: 01787 313995.

Web: [www.hse.gov.uk/hsehome.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/hsehome.htm)

### Union publications

Many unions, including UNISON, The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP), NATFHE, CWU, GMB and MSF have produced guides on working alone. Contact your union for details.

Unions including BIFU and MSF have produced guidelines on teleworking, including agreements, equipment, insurance and mortgage questions, heating and phone bills, health checks and communication.

## Home alone

Homeworkers are particularly at risk from hazards and the lack of support and procedures to deal with them. "Normal" work systems rarely take account of the presence of children and babies in the "workplace".

Hazards include:

**Stress and long hours**, trying to fit in work and family at home without child care provision, adequate pay and with social and professional isolation;

**Machinery that is noisy**, not properly mounted or unsuitable for the type of electricity supply in the home. Homeworkers can also be labelled a "noisy neighbour" and face action by local authority nuisance inspectors.

**Chemicals and glues that may be flammable or toxic or give off fumes.** Homeworkers soldering electronic components, for example, have been told to sit by an open window, which can just mean the draught carries fumes right into their breathing zone. Fibres and dusts that can cause breathing difficulties or allergies due to poor ventilation;

Many homeworkers are required to do fast, fiddly, repetitive assembly, sewing of cutting work on a piece-work basis, leading to a major strain injuries risk.

Homes are not designed as work-places: there can be lack of information and warning about equipment and substances, fire hazards and procedures, first aid and protective equipment and clothing; lack of storage facilities can be a fire risk; there is no regular collection of waste material produced; no regular servicing or maintenance of equipment; lack of assistance with equipment such as footing a ladder or lifting heavy articles; and lack of help if an accident occurs or if homeworker feels unwell.

TUC's *Hazards at Work* guide includes the following Homeworkers safety checklist.

**Find out** if your employer is using homeworkers and for what kind of work.

**Find out** if homeworkers meet together as a group to discuss problems and overcome the feeling of isolation of working at home.

**Find out** if your union runs any campaigns or provides information for homeworkers. Make sure this information reaches them.

**Check that homeworkers know they have a right to join a trade union.** They can receive free legal advice and representation at tribunals. Unions make a point of keeping names confidential and will not pass them onto any official body.

### Homeworking advice

West Yorkshire Homeworking Unit c/o 102 Commercial Street, Batley, WF17 5DP. Tel: 01924 443850.

Home Net. 24 Harlech Terrace, Leeds, LS11 7DX. The International Network for Home-based Workers.

National Group on Homeworking. NGH Office 26, 30-38 Dock Street, Leeds, LS10 1JF. Tel: 0113 245 4273.

## Who is at risk?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) says lone workers are "those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision."

Three broad groups of workers are at risk, those: Working alone on site; working away from base; and homeworkers.

UNISON's new guide, *Working alone: A health and safety guide on lone working for safety representatives*, offers a catch-all definition: "A worker whose activities involve a large percentage of their working time operating in situations without the benefit of interaction with other workers or without supervision."

## Covered by the law

HSE's short guide to working alone says: "Although there is no general legal prohibition on working alone, the broad duties of the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSW) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (MHSW) still apply. The require identifying hazards of the work, assessing the risks involved, and putting measures in place to avoid or control the risks."

The guide adds that safety reps should be consulted: "It is important to talk to employees and their safety representatives as they are a valuable source of information and advice."

### WORKER

#### Taxi drivers

Institution staff, social workers, health visitors

Electrical/maintenance workers

Emergency services, security workers

Farm/forestry/horticultural workers

Home helps, care assistants, cleaners

Lab workers

Meter readers, delivery, postal workers

Nursing staff

Parking attendants

Shop/service sector workers

Sewer/public workers

Transport workers

### HAZARDS

Abusive customers, road rage, violence, robbery, road accidents

Abusive/violent patients/clients/relatives, lifting hazards

Electric shocks, trips, cuts, falls, accidents, confined spaces

Abuse, violence, robbery, traffic hazards, accidents, biological hazards, falls, burns, toxic exposures

Animal attack, weather, machinery accidents, chemicals

Falls, injury, lifting, injuries from garbage handling, infections, chemicals, violence, robbery

Chemical over-exposure, biological agents, physical hazards, fires

Animal attack, abusive customers, violence, robbery, accidents

Lifting injuries, abusive patients, drug handling, robbery, violence

Robbery, violence, abuse, vehicle fumes

Robbery, violence, abuse, lifting injuries

Confined spaces, toxic gases, biohazards, slips and falls

Abuse, road rage, violence, robbery, road accidents, falling asleep at the wheel

Many other groups of workers will at times be at risk, among them; journalists, kiosk workers, sales reps, estate agents, warehouse workers, window cleaners, pest controllers, building workers and doctors.