

1. INTRODUCTION OF SAFE STRUCTURES

The consequences of any unauthorised alterations/modifications to scaffolds could potentially result in a fatality or serious injury to contractors, the general public or yourself and may result in damage to adjacent property.

The practice of interfering or modifying of scaffolds by non-qualified scaffolding operatives is unacceptable under any circumstances and may lead to prosecution by the enforcing authorities. Scaffolds should only be modified by competent scaffolders who have been authorised to do so by the scaffold contractor. It is also unacceptable for the client/user to authorise alterations without prior consent from the scaffold contractor as it may invalidate their insurance cover and could be an offence under Section 7 of the Health and Safety at Work Act. Most principal contractors now enforce a zero tolerance policy in regards to unauthorised scaffold interference by their contractors, and work closely with the scaffolding contractor to ensure it is applied.

The most common types of scaffold interference are the removal of scaffold structural ties by other trades, the removal of handrails and toe boards to allow materials to be loaded directly onto the working platforms and the undermining of the scaffold foundations by utility contractors.

Good planning and communication with all contractors will help prevent unauthorised scaffold modifications.

The guidance below will help the user in assuring that scaffold structures are, and remain, fit for purpose.

All scaffolds shall be erected in accordance with statutory requirements and in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions when using system scaffolds. Wherever possible NASC approved companies should be utilised.

All tube and fitting and system scaffolding of any height shall be erected, modified & dismantled by a Construction Industry Scaffolders' Records Scheme (CISRS) qualified scaffolder or trainee under the supervision of a CISRS qualified Scaffolder.

All mobile tower scaffolds shall be erected by a competent person who is in the possession of a PASMA qualification or other recognised qualifications.

All structures must be handed over by a competent person to the customer, in some cases a "tag" type system is used at the ladder access points which clearly shows the validity / suitability of the structure. It is a legal requirement within the Work at Height Regulations 2005 that all scaffolds must be inspected:

- Before it is put into use
- At seven day intervals until it is dismantled
- After bad or excessively wet weather or high winds or another event likely to have effected its strength or stability
- After any substantial additions or other alterations
- After unauthorised interference

A written report must be prepared by the competent person. A copy of the report should be kept on site and a further copy be retained for a period of three months from the completion of the work with the person on whose behalf the inspection was carried out. If a scaffold fails inspection this must be reported by the person carrying out the inspection, to the person responsible for the scaffolding, as soon as possible.

2. HOW TO IDENTIFY UNAUTHORISED MODIFICATIONS

The information below is not an exhaustive list but should assist you to recognise good practice before and whilst using scaffold structures:



Ground works around scaffold foundations



Removal of inside boards by other trades

- Check that the foundations have not been disturbed or undermined and the standards are on base plates and sole boards (as necessary).
- Check that guardrails are not missing and they are installed on every lift.



Removal of guardrails by other trades

- Check that toeboards have not been removed, or displaced.
- Check that any scaffold boards have not been removed, displaced or damaged (e.g. disc cutter marks).
- Check that transoms are suitably placed to support the boards and that the maximum support span identified on the board end plate has not been exceeded.
- Check that scaffold ties have not been removed.
- Check that any bracing is not missing.
- Check that any brickguards and/or netting, where fitted, are still in place.
- Check that the structure is not being overloaded.
- Check for any other signs of unauthorised interference. If found, report them to the scaffold contractor immediately.



Photographs by courtesy of GKR Scaffolding Ltd.

Bricklayer tampering with the structure



Photographs by courtesy of GKR Scaffolding Ltd.

Stop-end removed by other trades



Photographs by courtesy of GKR Scaffolding Ltd.

Ladder removed by other trades

3. ACTION TO BE TAKEN IF CONCERNED

If for any reason you identify that the structure has been interfered with, the first priority will be to ensure the safety of any contractors who may be working or intending to work on the structure. All users must vacate the structure by a safe means and access to the scaffold should be restricted until such time that it has been inspected and if required, the components replaced by competent scaffolding operatives.

4. CASE STUDIES OF WHEN INTERFERENCE HAS TAKEN PLACE

Case Study 1

On Tuesday 11 April 2006, just after noon, an independent tied perimeter scaffold collapsed at McAleer & Rushe construction site in Milton Keynes. The collapse started on the West Elevation (facing Witan Gate), with a partial collapse of the North Elevation (facing Midsummer Boulevard). The scaffold collapse was contained within the Jury's Inn site boundary. Three workers who were on the scaffold sustained multiple injuries. Sadly, one worker, died 3 days later in hospital.

In 2006 the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) issued a safety alert to the construction industry following this incident. The warning aims to alert those working on similar projects to the importance of their arrangements to provide and maintain stable scaffolds. HSE recommends that those arrangements are reviewed regularly.

HSE Principal Inspector Stephen Hartley said:

“It is totally unacceptable for companies to disregard the safety of their workers. If the scaffolding had been designed, erected and managed properly, this incident would never have happened.”

Case Study 2

A Tyneside construction company was fined after a worker suffered serious injuries following a fall from unsafe scaffolding. Ian Allan Building Contractors Ltd was prosecuted by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) following the incident in the grounds of the Old Vicarage, off Knaresborough Road, Murton, County Durham on 1 May 2009.

Consett Magistrates' Court heard a worker was working on the windows of a new building when the scaffolding platform he was standing on became dislodged, causing him to fall more than four meters to the ground. The worker suffered several crushed vertebrae in his spine and a fractured left foot and was in hospital for two weeks following the incident.

The HSE investigation revealed that the company had failed to control alterations to the scaffolding, failed to conduct inspections of the scaffold at least every seven days, failed to identify and correct unsafe alterations and allowed workers to use unsafe scaffolding. Ian Allan Building Contractors Ltd, pleaded guilty of breaching Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

After sentencing, the injured person said:

“I took it for granted the scaffolding I was working on was safe. If it had been checked properly the incident never would have happened and I wouldn't be left with the injuries I have to live with now.

“I've had steel rods put in my spine, I'm in constant pain and it restricts my movement and makes walking really difficult. I'll probably never be able to do the job I did again.

“I hope this prosecution helps make other employers realise the importance of ensuring scaffolding is safe so other workers don't have to suffer as I have.”

After the case, HSE Construction Inspector Andrea Robbins said:

“This incident could and should have been prevented. Ian Allan Building Contractors Ltd failed in their legal duty to ensure the safety of its employees by failing to manage the scaffolding on site adequately.

“As a result of these failures, the injured person has suffered serious injuries and is still living with the effects of those injuries more than a year and a half later.

“Scaffolding is widely used as a temporary working platform or means of access and this incident clearly illustrates the absolute need to ensure that it is safe.

“I'd like to stress to all companies and employees who use scaffolding that it should always be constructed to a recognised standard, any alterations should only be made by a competent person and it should be inspected by a competent person on handover and at least every seven days as work progresses.”