SG36:18

Unauthorised Modifications to Scaffolds

NASC
National Access & Scaffolding Confederation

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of interfering with 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 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 regard 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 used.

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, such as the MATS training endorsed on rear of CISRS cards.

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

A written inspection report must be prepared by the competent person. A copy of the report should be kept on site and a further copy should be retained, for a period of three months from the completion of the work, by 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:

- 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.
- 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.

A common trend is third party interference, for example other trades removing inner guardrails to access a building structure to complete their task. The removal of inner guardrails exposes the third party to risk of a fall or falling objects. SG29 (Latest Edition) Internal Edge Protection on Scaffold Platforms states that the safe system of work may allow for some internal edge protection to be removed for a limited period of time, providing other measures to prevent or mitigate a fall are in place and enforced. Where internal edge protection is incomplete or no internal edge protection has been requested by the client, scaffolding providers must advise the client on the Handover Certificate that the scaffold does not comply with current legislation and that they (the client) have a duty to prevent falls, of a person or materials.

Once the scaffold has been handed over the user MUST be advised that the scaffold becomes their responsibility.

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

Here is an excavation undermining a scaffold tower, which was supporting a 12m span of a beam section with 19 lifts erected above beam level, which had the potential to cause a scaffold collapse.

When the inspector asked the ground workers what they were doing they answered, “it’s ok we will be back filling the excavation in a couple of hours”. If you look closely at the leg above the excavation you can see where it has been hit and bent with the bucket of the machine whilst carrying out the dig.

Case Study 2

Ties removed from scaffold by 3rd party contractors.

This was a 13 lift high scaffold on a high-rise apartment development in the West Midlands. Over 50 ties were found to be missing, leaving 8 lifts unsupported and at significant risk of collapse due to instability. The working lifts were fully loaded with masonry and two of the elevations had been clad with solid plastic scaffolding sheeting (monarflex type). Fortunately these hazards were identified and remedial actions taken to prevent a collapse, and the imminent danger averted.

Note: Overloading a scaffold – especially on the inside boards – is also an unauthorised modification.

Case Study 3

A 3rd party had removed an entire standard that was restricting access from a loading bay and replaced it with a piece of 4 x 2 timber to prop up the deflecting lift above!

Case Study 4

An independent tied perimeter scaffold collapsed at a construction site in Milton Keynes. This occurred because the scaffold had been altered several times reducing its structural stability. Platforms were also overloaded and the combination caused it to fail. Three workers who were on the scaffold sustained multiple injuries. Sadly, one worker died 3 days later in hospital.

REFERENCES

Guidance

NASC Guidance Documents, including the following:

- SG25:14 Access and Egress from Scaffolds, via Ladders and Stair Towers etc.

NASC, 4th Floor, 12 Bridewell Place, London EC4V 6AP
Tel: 020 7822 7400 Fax: 020 7822 7401
enquiries@nasc.org.uk www.nasc.org.uk