

Assessing risk and careful planning are key to safety when working at height

# One false step...



There are some jobs on a dairy unit that should never be rushed – and perhaps not even attempted at all without calling in a competent contractor. Fixing a broken cow-house roof light is typically one of them. Read on to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

**F**alling from height is a major cause of life-changing injury or death on farms and the latest statistics, released by the HSE, show that five people died on farms as a result of a fall in 2013.

“Four of those who died fell through a fragile roof or roof light,” says Alastair Mitchell, one of the Health and Safety Executive’s agricultural inspectors. Many roofs are covered in asbestos cement sheets and these are not strong enough

to support a person’s weight. And Mr Mitchell says that a good starting point is to assume that all roofs are fragile. “Unless you know, for certain, otherwise. Old and new buildings alike have fragile roofs and there is a requirement to display signs on the sides of buildings with fragile roofs to warn people about that fact,” he adds.

Roof lights are also fragile, with the added problem that they’re not always easy to

spot in poor light, or if they’ve covered in moss or algae. He says that some producers think it’s safe to walk along the line of the roofing bolts where the sheets are attached to the purlins.

“But that’s like walking a tight rope and it’s easy to accidentally slip, or take a step either side, onto the fragile surface.”

## Take precautions

Any access across a fragile surface, or work on it, will require precautions against falls. “Gone are the days when you could rely on a couple of crawling boards alone. If you have to be up on the roof you need to take suitable precautions against falls – and that means that for most jobs proprietary work platforms, with guard rails and toe boards, will be required.”

At this time of year many producers’ thoughts will be turning to those last-minute repairs to cow housing and



*Fragile roofs: asbestos cement sheets and roof lights are not strong enough to support a person's weight*



*Hazard warning: displaying signs on buildings with fragile roofs is a requirement*



clearing guttering and down pipes before the winter.

“Ask yourself if you really need to go up on the roof to carry out maintenance or repair work. Is there another way? And, if not, how can you do it safely?”

For example, hiring a mobile tower scaffold may be just the thing for safely clearing gutters. Or perhaps a mobile elevating platform or ‘cherry picker’ would be better suited to the job? The cost of buying or hiring the equipment can always be shared with a neighbour.

“If you are considering a working platform with a guard rail for your telehandler – also known as a ‘man cage’ – be aware that the equipment being used has to comply with HSE requirements.”

He refers producers to HSE guidance note PM28 – a document that outlines the specifications for both the platform and the lift truck that’s being used. “So read that first, if you’re thinking of buying or using one.”

Mr Mitchell stresses that it is not safe or legal to use a grain bucket or other attachment as a platform when working at height. “Many people have been seriously injured or killed using equipment on a lift truck that was unsuitable for the job. Pallet tines, wooden boxes, shear grabs, muck forks or buckets must never be used, either as a means of gaining access or as a working platform.”

### Assess risk

“Whatever you’re doing, when you’re working at height there’s a high risk of serious injury or death, so it’s vital that the job’s done safely. That means that producers need to assess the risks involved and plan the job carefully. The repair or maintenance task itself may be small, but you should nevertheless invest sufficient time into planning it correctly. If not, it could cost you your life.”

It’s not the ‘height’ or drop that’s the problem either. Just falling a short distance can result in serious injury or

death. “We’ve had people who’ve fallen a short distance but have landed on their head or fallen awkwardly. Cattle yards are concrete and there are also metal structures – such as gates, pens, troughs or stored equipment – which can easily cause serious or fatal injury if people fall on them, even if it’s just from a couple of metres,” says Mr Mitchell. He recalls one man who fell from the second rung of a ladder and died as a result of his injuries. This unfortunate man fell backwards when both feet slipped from the rung and he hit the back of his head on a concrete floor and fractured his skull. “The ladder slipped, because it wasn’t secured, and he lost his balance and his life.”

### Ladder safety

Ladders are another area of concern on many units. “A ladder may be acceptable for certain short-duration low-risk jobs, but it needs to be maintained in good condition, not damaged, twisted or with rungs missing. HSE recommends British Standard (BS) Class 1 ‘Industrial’ or BS EN 131 ladders for use at work

“As an inspector, I’ve seen some truly awful ‘home-made’ ladders with rungs missing or replaced with pieces of wood nailed into place. There have been plenty of ladders that I have refused to climb and had taken out of use.”

He recalls a fatality that he investigated on a livestock farm involving a fall from a ladder. During the investigation the ladder was found to be in extremely poor condition and not fit for use. “The ladder had failed dramatically. One of the wooden stiles to which the rungs were attached had split from the base up and as the ladder fell apart it toppled over and the man fell onto a concrete yard floor. He died from his injuries.”

Ladders should be set up at the correct angle of 75 degrees – use the one in four rule, that’s one unit out for every four units up – and make sure the ladder is tied or secured near the top to prevent movement. If this is not possible have

someone ‘foot’ the ladder at the bottom to stop it moving when it’s in use. Alternatively a ladder stability device can be used.

He says that ladders can be used safely for some jobs but, as with roof work, careful planning and assessing the risks should help you decide if using a ladder is the safest option. For example, using a power washer on a ladder to clean down feed bins would not be considered safe. The recoil from a power washer can easily throw you off a ladder, so again a work platform or scaffold are more suitable options to use in this situation.

Considering the risks involved, or if you’re simply not comfortable with working at height it’s often best to employ a contractor for such jobs – Mr Mitchell points that producers also have responsibilities for health and safety here too.

“Discuss with them any risks involved in the job you’ve asked them to do. It’s your responsibility to ensure that they are aware of any fragile roofs and tell them about other hazards and risks around the farm that may be relevant.

“You may need to warn them about hazardous areas including the location of overhead power lines and slurry pits. It’s also important to check that they are competent to do the job. Have they had training for working at height? Do they have the necessary equipment needed to carry out the job safely?”

“Make sure that you’re reasonably confident that they know what they’re doing and how to do it safely,” he adds.

As far as working at height is concerned, if things go wrong you rarely get a second chance. One false step can all too easily end in disaster. So think ahead, use the right equipment and stay safe – your life and livelihood may depend on it. |

➔ To find out more about assessing risk and carrying out work at height safely, visit: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/falls.htm>