Falling objects are a leading cause of death and serious injury in the construction industry, and pose a risk to people in streets adjacent to construction sites. Even a relatively light and small object (such as a nut or bolt) can cause serious or fatal injuries when it falls from height and hits a person.

WorkSafe inspectors are currently visiting sites across Victoria to ensure duty holders are meeting their obligations by identifying hazards and controlling risks associated with falling objects.

Background
Each year, WorkSafe is notified of hundreds of incidents involving falling objects.

In the last five years there have been five fatalities and 721 compensation claims as a result of being injured by a falling object.

Common causes of objects falling
Construction equipment and materials (e.g. hand tools, scaffolding tubes and timber) often fall from heights due to:

- gaps between perimeter safety screens or holes in safety netting/mesh
- missing toe/kick boards on scaffolding
- debris or materials coming loose from plant or loads while they are being lifted
- being stored close to edges or left unsecured
- being blown from structures by wind
- being knocked or dropped.

Where objects land
Falling objects are not only a hazard on the construction site. When they deflect from structures or are blown diagonally by strong winds they can reach nearby public footpaths and streets. An object that falls from height can land:

- on the construction site, after falling from a perimeter or scaffold
- beyond site boundaries, such as on the street, after deflecting from a structure or being blown diagonally by the wind
- within a structure, after falling through a void, riser or other inadequately protected internal edge.

Duty holder obligations
Employers have a general duty to provide and maintain a safe working environment to employees (including contractors) so far as is reasonably practicable.

Duty holders (employers and self-employed persons) must also ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that other persons (such as members of the public) are not exposed to risks to their health or safety arising from their business activities.

Duty holders must follow the hierarchy of control for construction work set out in Part 5.1 (Construction) of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017 when controlling risks associated with construction work, including falling objects.

Risk control measures
Risk control measures that prevent objects from falling in the first place are better than control measures which are only effective after an object has fallen.

Note: A combination of risk control measures will usually be required.

Examples of falling object risk control measures

1. Eliminate
Eliminate the risk by designing it out of the build. For example, offsite assembly or fabrication to eliminate activities (or parts of activities) that would otherwise be performed at an elevated edge.

Reduce remaining risk by using a containment system or securing objects, through substitution, isolation or engineering controls. For example:

2. Substitute
Guardrail systems that incorporate mesh infill panels and kickboards

3. Isolate
Barricade or fence off exclusion zones at ground level, below elevated perimeter/edge work.

4. Engineer
- Perimeter safety screens on the building.
- Rated overhead protection gantries.
- Perimeter scaffolds enclosed with safety mesh, hoarding boards or brick guards.
- Retention screens or mesh around edges of internal voids and penetrations.
- Safety netting, mesh or curtain systems for the retention or containment of materials.
- Secure scaffold planks with proprietary clips to prevent dislodgement/uplift from high winds.
- Restrained loose materials with ropes, ratchet straps or adequate weights.

Note: Risk may be further reduced by use of tool lanyards, bags, pouches or buckets to contain loose items.

Reduce remaining risk by using administrative controls for example:

5. Administrative controls
- Line markings/signage to advise lanyard systems are to be used on tools.
- Monitor adverse weather warnings (for example by
using a weather application on a device) and have a response plan in place.
- Ensure good housekeeping practices.

Reduce effects of the risk, for example:

6. Personal protective equipment
Provide hard hats, high visibility clothing, steel capped boots.

Employee duties

While at work, employees must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by their acts or omissions at a workplace. This includes not interfering with or misusing anything provided at a workplace in the interests of health, safety or welfare. For example, not removing kick boards).

Further Information

Contact WorkSafe Advisory Service on 1800 136 089 or go to worksafe.vic.gov.au
- Information about: Prevention of and protection from falling objects on midrise structures
- Industry standard: Safe erection of structural steel for buildings
- Information about: Safe work method statements
- Handbook: Working safely in the general construction industry
- Handbook: Working safely in housing construction industry
- A handbook for workplaces: Controlling OHS hazards and risks

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