

SAFE SYSTEMS OF WORK



Health and Safety Guidance Note



NFU Mutual
RISK MANAGEMENT SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 [Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978], employers have a duty “to provide systems of work that are, so far as is reasonably practicable, safe and without risks to health”.

Safe systems of work should be developed for tasks with significant hazards, e.g. confined space entry, working at height, some manual handling tasks, unblocking machinery etc. Whilst every business is required to provide safe systems of work, this does not always need to be in writing. Your safe system of work may be defined orally, by a simple written procedure or, in exceptional cases by a formal permit to work system. Specific information on permit to work systems is provided in a separate guidance note.

Although there is no legal requirement for safe systems of work to be recorded, as a reference document it will help to ensure that all your employees know how to carry out a particular task in a standardised, ‘safe’ way. The document can form part of your training programme and it will also provide you with evidence that you have given due consideration to, and shared information on, the hazards associated with a particular task in the event of an incident.

WHAT IS A SAFE SYSTEM OF WORK?

A safe system of work is a formal procedure which will allow a specific task (usually one with significant hazards) to be undertaken in a ‘safe’ and pre-defined way. Before the task is started, it should be systematically examined, which includes the identification and elimination of any hazards associated with the task, or reducing the risks to an acceptable level.

HOW DO I DEVELOP A SAFE SYSTEM OF WORK?

Safe systems of work should be developed by a competent person, i.e. a person with sufficient training, experience or knowledge and other qualities to assist with key aspects of safety management and compliance.

When developing a safe system of work you should follow these 5 steps:

1. Conduct a risk assessment;
2. Carry out research and consult employees on the best way to do the work;
3. Document the safe system of work;
4. Communicate the safe system of work to employees;
5. Review and monitor the effectiveness of the safe system of work.

1

Conducting a risk assessment –

Although not impossible, producing a safe system of work without first undertaking a risk assessment may be difficult.

The risk assessment should consider three types of control measures:

- Technical – e.g. engineering controls such as machinery guards;
- Behavioural – e.g. how individuals or groups should act in relation to the hazard;
- Procedural – e.g. specifying the exact nature of the task, including the sequence, checks and key safety actions.

Specific guidance on how to conduct risk assessments is provided in a separate guidance note.

2 Research and consultation – Sources of information that may need to be consulted include reference to legislation, guidance notes (many HSE guidance notes are freely available on the internet), manufacturers’ information/instruction manuals or information from trade associations etc. where available.

Employees who are actively involved in carrying out the work also have a valuable role to play in the development of the safe system of work and will help to ensure it is practical and that it will consequently be applied diligently.

Some or all of the following points should be considered when defining your safe methods of work:

- Consider the preparation and authorisation needed at the start of the job;
- Ensure clear planning of job sequences;
- Specify safe work methods;
- Identify the correct tools and equipment for the job;
- Include the correct isolation methods for all power sources;
- Identify what personal protective equipment should be used;
- Specify the need for carrying out pre-use safety checks (e.g. guarding);
- Include means of access and egress, including emergency escapes, for the people involved;
- Include arrangements to deal with emergencies (e.g. fire, explosion, spillage, etc.);
- Consider tasks such as dismantling, disposal, etc. at the end of the job.

3 Document the safe system of work – Documenting safe systems of work provides a standard reference point for all concerned. They may also prove essential if there is an inspection by any enforcement agencies or if any legal proceedings arise from an accident.

You should now have all the information you need to document, in a clear and logical order, the steps necessary to carry out the work. A safe system of work should neither be too simple nor too complicated. Try not to unnecessarily replicate the whole risk assessment when you document the safe system of work. It should be aimed at the person(s) who will be required to use it.

When writing a safe system of work, the following tips may be helpful:

- Be clear and concise – bear in mind the level of detail required/competence of employees;
- Use photos, charts, diagrams, etc. if this will clarify the procedure;
- Use familiar language – avoid the use of ‘slang’ or abbreviations;
- Use terminology consistently (e.g. valve ‘A’ is always called valve ‘A’).

A template for a simple safe system of work is provided at the end of this guidance note.

4 Communicate the safe system of work – Effective communication is essential to the success of any safe system of work. All relevant people must be informed of the safe system of work and what their respective duties and responsibilities are.

Training will be required in the skills that are needed and also to make workers aware of the hazards which the system of work aims to control. The training should also cover emergency procedures, in particular the requirement to stop work in the event of problems arising that are not covered by the safe system of work. The need to avoid short cuts must be stressed.

It is important that workers are appropriately supervised. Effective supervision can help you monitor the effectiveness of the training that people have received, and whether employees have the necessary competence to do the job.

5 **Review and monitor the effectiveness of the safe system of work** – Review the safe system of work periodically to ensure it remains appropriate and in line with ‘best practice’. Seek the opinion of those who will be doing the work to ensure it reflects the practical aspects of doing the task.

Monitoring should ensure the safe system of work continues to be workable, effective, and safe and that it achieves its intended aims. It should also identify any changes to the tasks which can then be addressed accordingly. In addition, effective supervision will ensure that tasks are being carried out in accordance with the safe system of work.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- HSE website
www.hse.gov.uk/index.htm
- Various trade associations have developed standard safe systems of work for their industry

SAFE SYSTEM OF WORK

Business Name: _____

SAFE SYSTEM OF WORK	
Provide a description of the job undertaken	
Describe, in order, how the job should be undertaken	
Describe the main hazards that may be encountered whilst doing this job	
Describe the key control measures that should prevent any harm occurring	
Further information	

Version: _____

Date created: _____

Review Date: _____

Signature: _____

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