Using a ladder at work: what to check before starting

Before using a ladder, ask whether the task can be completed from the ground or with a safer arrangement. Consider the object being handled, duration, reach, work area and people nearby. If a ladder is suitable, it must be appropriate for the task and used by someone competent under the employer's arrangements. Staff need the equipment-specific instruction and checks.

GB planning and recognition introduction; practical equipment instruction and task competence are separate.

The practical principles

Recognise the activity

Work at height involves work where a fall could cause injury, including some tasks close to ground level or beside an opening. Ask whether the work can be done from the ground first. The task, duration, reach, environment and equipment all affect the method. Standing on a chair or stacked boxes is an improvised arrangement that should be stopped and referred to the supervisor.

Use the planned method

Ladders can be suitable for some low-risk, short-duration tasks when the assessment supports their use. Staff need instruction in the actual equipment and safe setup. Check for damage and follow inspection and securing arrangements. Keep the work area controlled, consider doors and passing people, and avoid overreaching. If the task needs both hands or substantial force, ask whether different access equipment is required.

Stop when conditions change

Wind, wet ground, damaged equipment or an unexpected reach can make the original plan unsuitable. Stop and seek a revised method. Keep other people clear of dropped-object risks. Rescue arrangements must match the activity where needed. This course covers awareness and planning questions; it provides no practical ladder, scaffold or powered-access assessment.

Work through a shift scenario

Fictional exercise: a worker is asked to retrieve a heavy box from a high store shelf during service. They pause and raise the problem with the supervisor. Changing storage or using a suitable handling arrangement may remove the need to carry the load while climbing. A chair or stacked crate is not an acceptable improvised access solution.

Avoid the common failure

A quick task can still cause a serious fall. Check the equipment condition, stability, access and protection from nearby activity. Avoid overreaching or proceeding when the task cannot be controlled. This guide supports planning and recognition; it does not certify practical ladder competence or authorise work at height.

A second situation to discuss

Fictional scenario: A bartender stands on stacked crates to adjust a light above a crowded service area.

Stop the improvised access and clear the immediate risk. Ask the supervisor to arrange a suitable method and trained person, considering electrical hazards and the people below. Schedule the work when the area can be controlled.

Use a working record

Record the specific arrangements below before the briefing. Keep the wording short enough for a colleague to use during the shift. Where a field does not apply, explain why; where information is missing, assign a person to resolve it. Store personal or sensitive details in the business's approved system.

- Task
- ground-level alternative
- selected equipment
- user instruction
- pre-use condition
- area protection
- authorisation

At the next handover, ask what changed, which action remains open and who now owns it. Close the record only when the agreed follow-up is complete. A recurring problem should inform the next briefing and the relevant operational procedure.

Check understanding

The first question is:

Can the task be done from the ground? Avoiding work at height can remove fall exposure.

A ladder is suitable:

When the assessment supports it and the user is instructed Task and equipment suitability must be considered.

Ladder check: the sign is just beyond reach

A menu board needs adjusting over a doorway. From the available stepladder the fitter can just touch the last screw by leaning sideways. Guests are arriving. What should change?

Compare your decision

Stop and reconsider whether the job can be done from ground level. Have the responsible person choose suitable access equipment and control the doorway before work begins. Moving a ladder into a busy route creates another hazard.

Ask the team to describe the point at which work stops if the route cannot be controlled. Put that decision into the setup briefing before the next sign change.

Sources and scope

- Source: https://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/ladders/index.htm
- Source: https://www.hse.gov.uk/work-equipment-machinery/training-competence.htm

Original workplace examples and suggested record. Prepared 19 October 2026. Use the current linked guidance and the venue's procedures for operational decisions.

Use this on shift

Resource page and fillable working record · Read the online guide · Course details