



Managing the winter in construction.

After a summer where the worry was sunstroke, sunburn, heat exhaustion and other associated maladies, we now move into the winter cycle where a whole host of new hazards await the construction worker. As well as considering basic factors like the weather, we also need to factor in personal and environmental issues which may affect workers and ultimately, your business.

Environmental factors

Aside from the obvious cold, we need to factor in other issues.

- Lighting: Can the workers see where they are going and what they are doing after dark?
- Weather: Rain, wind, snow, ice, fog and hail can all present their own unique problems, whether it be from an icy sloping footboard half way up a scaffolding or a crane obscured by fog.
- Accumulation of leaves can become very slippery and can block drains leaving large puddles of water and/or mini ice rinks. Ice in enclosed spaces expands, potentially damaging machinery of safety equipment.
- Even gritting can cause other hazards whether it be from chunks of rock salt thrown up by plant and machinery or rust damaging the integrity of metal structures as a result of being covered in salt over a period of time.
- Sometimes, workers start open brazier fires on site to keep warm using up waste materials. This is a definite no across the board. Especially as there is no control as to what is thrown in it, be it sawdust (explodes) or aerosol cans from glue (explode too and shower hot metal around).
- Shortcuts are often used, such as putting diesel on rungs of ladders to thaw them out. This actually helps very little as it just makes it more slippery and there is potential environmental damage.

Personal Factors

Age. Older people are less likely to be resilient to the cold.

Physical makeup. Larger people tend to feel the cold less.

Any particular medical conditions like Raynauds, vibration white finger, loss of circulation, cold urticaria, even chilblains and ultimately, hypothermia, can affect workers performance and ultimately, their safety.

Exposure to cold also creates fatigue, shivering, loss of concentration, confusion and disorientation, not the best thing stuck up on a scaffold at height.

Cold Stress

Other issues

- Machinery that needs to be started doesn't respond too well to cold weather
- Increased wet and rain increases the potential exposure to electrical shorting resulting in fire or shock.

What should we do then?

Of course, the first stop is our old friend the risk assessment and many of the issues you need to cover are listed above, but of course, there will be others. Common solutions will include

- Appropriate exposure to harsh environments limited by time. Regular breaks to warm up and a place to go to do it, preferably a safe place free of damp PPE etc.
- Consider what PPE is to be used. Thermal clothing may be necessary for insulation. This can be socks, gloves, underwear, jackets, layers, coats, hats and the like.
- Bear in mind that a person engaging in physical exertion generating their own heat is a very different case from a person sat in the open in a fork lift truck all day.
- Hot fluids should be provided and a place to warm food or get hot food. A microwave usually suffices. Keep it clean though and looked after as food poisoning can be most unpleasant.
- Employees should be consulted as to their needs and management should watch out for the signs of cold health issues (eg loss of concentration).
- All this should be documented as part of your safety systems and successfully communicated to the workforce. This will help keep them safe, keep your project on time and on budget, create a caring culture and reduce the likelihood of injury claims against your business.

Construction specialities

One of the relatively rare features of the construction industry is that it is one of the few that tend to shut down completely over Christmas.

This raises a whole new set of risk factors, which should be addressed. Suddenly, a site goes from fully operational to zero overnight. There may still be plant on site, live electricity supplies, live water mains, a breach in the perimeter boundary which may encourage vandals, children, thieves or homeless to encroach upon the site with associated security and/or safety implications. So here are a few suggestions to consider and why.

- Security: Ensure that perimeter fences and boundaries are secure and locked.
- Consider installing CCTV capable of recording for at least the shut down period and site it where it is difficult to tamper with it from outside.



- It may be feasible to install local intruder alarms in completed sections. Ideally, these would be linked to a remote monitoring centre.
- If the site is of a certain size, it may be wise to install a 24 hour security station from an external security company with appropriate patrols.
- Plant theft is a massive issue in the UK still. Any left plant should be properly immobilised and tracked. This can be via a proprietary immobiliser, associated specific CCTV, marked up with security water such as SMARTwater or perhaps placed in a cul-de-sac position with the exit blocked by a large digger shovel. Ideally, all of these!
- Connected utilities may cause damage. Ideally, water systems should be drained down and unnecessary electrical supplies shut off. Freezing weather may rupture a water pipe and when thawed, may permit a continuous leak for weeks and possibly into electrical circuits.
- If unauthorised persons are able to access the site and injure themselves, there may be a civil compensation claim against your company because you didn't take adequate steps to ensure security and safety. This could also result in a criminal prosecution for the company or an officer of the company.

Contact us

We have a dedicated risk management team and property and construction specialists on hand to support you and your business, for further information please don't hesitate to contact our team below.

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