

Ladder Types - HSE Perspective

Legal Definition

Under the **Work at Height Regulations 2005, Regulation 2**, a "ladder" is legally defined as including **both fixed ladders and stepladders**. This is deliberately broad to ensure proper safety controls.

Common Ladder Types

1. Leaning Ladders (Portable Ladders)

Technical Name: Leaning ladder / Portable ladder

Positioned at an angle against a surface, typically following the **1-in-4 rule** (one unit out for every four units up, creating a 75° angle). Used for short-duration access to elevated positions.

2. Stepladders

Technical Name: Stepladder

Self-supporting 'A' frame ladders. **Legally classified as ladders** under Work at Height Regulations 2005, despite what laypeople might assume. All four feet must be on the ground with steps level before use.

3. Fixed Ladders

Technical Name: Fixed ladder

Permanently installed ladders attached to structures, buildings, or equipment. Explicitly included in the legal definition of "ladder".

4. Hooped/Caged Ladders

Technical Name: Hooped ladder or Caged ladder

Fixed vertical ladders with metal hoops/cages around them. **Important HSE finding:** Hoops do NOT provide complete fall protection and may interfere with personal fall arrest systems. Common in industrial settings, towers, and silos.

5. Telescopic Ladders

Technical Name: Telescopic ladder

Adjustable leaning ladders with extendable sections that lock in place. Require careful checking of locking mechanisms before each use. Risk of finger trapping when closing.

6. Combination Ladders

Alternative Names: Multi-purpose ladders, "A" frame ladders

Versatile ladders configurable as stepladders or leaning ladders. Must check locking mechanisms are engaged before use and after changing configuration.

7. Roof Ladders

Technical Name: Roof ladder

Specialist ladders for pitched roofs. Must have a ridge hook that bears on the opposite slope. **Critical:** Anchorage must NOT depend on ridge capping (which can break away).

8. Quayside Ladders

Technical Name: Quayside ladder

Specialist fixed ladders used at ports and harbours for vessel access. Subject to specific HSE standards for port operations.

Technical Standards

- **EN131:** Current standard for portable ladders and stepladders in the UK
- **BS2037 and BS1129:** Withdrawn standards, but ladders manufactured to these standards before withdrawal may still be used if properly maintained
- **Industrial grade:** HSE references industrial-grade ladders for workplace use (higher load capacity and durability than domestic ladders)

What is NOT a Ladder?

Many items that laypeople consider "ladders" are NOT classified as ladders by HSE:

Mobile Elevating Work Platforms (MEWPs)

Cherry pickers, scissor lifts, boom lifts. These are **powered mobile work platforms**, not ladders. HSE considers them higher-level fall protection and generally prefers them over ladders for longer-duration work.

Scaffolding and Tower Scaffolds

Classified as "**working platforms**" under Work at Height Regulations 2005, not ladders. Tower scaffolds may contain internal ladder access, but the tower itself is a mobile working platform providing better fall protection.

Permanent Staircases

Work at Height Regulations do **NOT apply** to normal access/egress via permanent staircases. Staircases provide superior fall protection and are not temporary work equipment. (Regulations DO apply if work is being carried out ON the stairs themselves.)

Crawling Boards / Cat Ladders

These are **roof working platforms**, not ladders. They distribute weight on fragile roof surfaces rather than providing vertical access.

Step Stools / Kick Stools

Ambiguous classification. While covered by Work at Height Regulations, HSE doesn't explicitly classify these as "ladders" under Regulation 2, though they function similarly to very short stepladders. HSE operational guidance specifically addresses kick stools as acceptable for low-risk, short tasks (e.g., "a librarian using a kick stool to retrieve a book").

Key Distinctions and Reasoning

Why stepladders ARE ladders

The legal definition explicitly includes stepladders to ensure they receive proper safety controls. Many accidents occur with stepladders due to improper use (e.g., standing on top platform, overreaching).

Why MEWPs and scaffolds are NOT ladders

These provide **higher levels of fall protection** with working platforms and guardrails. HSE hierarchy of control prefers these for longer-duration or higher-risk work.

Why permanent staircases are NOT covered

Staircases are permanent building features, not temporary work equipment. They provide superior protection (handrails, consistent tread depth) and represent normal, everyday access rather than "work at height".

Why crawling boards are NOT ladders

Different function: ladders provide vertical access, while crawling boards provide horizontal passage across fragile surfaces by distributing load.

When Can Ladders Be Used?

HSE emphasizes that **ladders are not banned** and can be sensible when:

1. **Risk assessment justifies their use** (low risk, short duration)
2. Task is **no more than 30 minutes at a time** (key HSE threshold)
3. Existing workplace features cannot be altered
4. Alternative equipment is not reasonably practicable

HSE hierarchy: For longer duration or higher risk:

- First choice: Working platforms, scaffolds, MEWPs
- Second choice: Collective fall protection
- Last resort: Ladders (with appropriate precautions)

Key HSE References

- Work at Height Regulations 2005, Regulation 2 (Interpretation)
- HSE Leaflet LA455: Safe Use of Ladders and Stepladders
- INDG401: Working at Height - A Brief Guide
- HSG33: Health and Safety in Roof Work
- [HSE Ladder Safety Hub](#)
- [HSE Types of Ladder Guidance](#)