

Lone Working: Support Staff

NEU Guidance for Support Staff Members

NEU advice on risks of lone working and what can be done to counter them.

Many NEU support staff work alone as part of their everyday working lives. However, working alone can place you in a vulnerable position; it may be more difficult to summon help if you have an accident or fall ill, or you may be more exposed to violence or abuse at work. Regardless of the reason, NEU believes none of its members should be more at risk in their jobs than other workers just because they are required to work on their own.

What is lone working?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines lone working as “those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision”.

From this it can be seen that lone working falls into three broad categories:

- those who work alone on site
- those who work away from base
- homeworkers.

For support staff in educational establishments, lone working is most likely to fall into the first two categories. It is these that this factsheet will focus on although the advice given can apply to other lone working situations.

Working alone on site

For many support staff, working alone forms an integral part of their day-to-day duties at work. These can include the following scenarios:

- 1:1 working for LSAs, teaching assistants, career advisers, mentors and school/college counsellors
- LSAs/teaching assistants working alone with small groups of students away from the main classroom or being on their own while providing playground supervision
- cover supervisors being responsible for whole-class supervision on their own
- support staff being left on their own to supervise classes during wet play periods
- support staff being left on their own to supervise students in exclusion rooms
- support staff providing personal care for pupils, such as administering first aid or medication, or assisting with toileting needs
- support staff being required to put up displays on their own

- office and maintenance staff being left on their own in premises during parts of the day and during some holiday and school closure periods
- librarians working alone or being left responsible for large numbers of students during break times and lunchtimes (with libraries being used in some schools as 'sin bins').
- lab technicians preparing chemicals and setting up experiments in science rooms.

Working away from base

Some activities and duties also require support staff to work away from school. Most commonly these involve:

- school trips, e.g. to swimming pool (with changing room supervision)
- home/school liaison visits to students' homes.

What are the risks of lone working?

There are many risks associated with support staff being required to work on their own.

These can relate to their physical wellbeing and health and safety and can include:

- violence/abuse/bullying from students
- personal safety issues while visiting students' homes
- onset of sudden illness
- feelings of stress and isolation
- accidents or emergencies requiring evacuation procedures or access to first aid
- working at height
- risk of intruders.

There can also be risks to the professional integrity of support staff which could involve accusations of theft or misconduct and/or malicious allegations from students. Subsequent investigations or rumours can exact a great toll on the mental health of those accused as well as threaten their livelihood.

What does the law say?

Lone working is not illegal. It is accepted that some workers will be required to work all or some of the time on their own. However, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places a duty of care on employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees while at work. In addition, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations state every employer should make a "suitable and sufficient" assessment of the risks to the health and safety of their employees. This includes lone workers and those who spend part of their time working alone.

The key principle that underpins the law is that those who work alone should not be placed at any greater risk than any other worker.

What should a lone-working risk assessment consider?

Risk assessments should be relevant to the circumstances of the support staff member in question and the particular tasks being undertaken. Information on risks should be gathered from all available sources including, for example, the accident book and any incident log books.

It is also essential that support staff are asked by the person carrying out the risk assessment if they have any concerns about working on their own. Often it is only the person actually doing the job that can identify all the risks associated with it. While not an exhaustive list, the following are some of the questions that a lone working risk assessment should ask:

- Is there a risk of violence or aggression?
- Is the member vulnerable to malicious accusations?
- Is the member vulnerable, e.g. pregnant/young/ disabled/have English as a second language/have a particular medical condition?
- Will the member be using machinery/equipment/ handling chemicals that could be hazardous?
- Will the member be working at height e.g putting up or dismantling a display?
- What will happen in the event of an emergency e.g. if the member falls ill, has an accident or there is a fire alarm or emergency procedure?
- Is there access to first aid facilities?
- What age of students is the member is working with? Younger pupils may require a higher staff/student ratio.
- Do the students have any special needs e.g. behavioural/medical that require closer supervision and a higher staff/student ratio?
- Is the support staff member working in an isolated part of the school or in a separate annexe/cabin/ playing field?
- Type of activity being undertaken? Are the students on the move? Are they in the playground or using equipment as this could increase the risk of an accident?

What if risks are identified?

Where the assessment identifies risks to the lone worker, the first question asked must be whether the work needs to be carried out in the first place. If the answer is yes, which it will be for many activities undertaken by support staff, then arrangements must be put in place to provide the lone worker with additional support systems or back-up. What are known as 'control measures' must be introduced to reduce the risks identified as much as possible. Preferably these control measures should be outlined in the school's lone working policy (which may form part of the general workplace health and safety policy) and should include details of the following:

- The training and information that will be provided to support staff to help them recognise and deal with any situations which may arise that threaten their or their students', health and safety. This could relate to violence or aggression/basic first aid/emergency procedures in the event of fire, etc.

- The safety procedures for those working on their own including guidance and recommendations on staff/ student ratios in certain circumstances, eg, in libraries at lunchtimes or exclusion units.
- How lone workers will be contacted and accounted for during an emergency situation.
- The information and guidance provided to those paying home visits e.g. background information on families; to always let someone know where they are and how long they are expected to be; or contact information.
- Provision of equipment e.g. mobile phone, walkie-talkie or personal alarm for those who may be working in an isolated location or remote part of the school's premises.
- Proper training and provision of personal protective equipment for those dealing with hazardous substances.
- Consultation arrangements with staff and NEU health and safety representatives to ensure that lone working arrangements and risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis.

NEU Health and Safety Reps

NEU Health and Safety Representatives can also play a very important role in ensuring that support staff that have to work on their own remain safe. They have a legal right to be consulted on any health and safety issues arising from members having to work alone.

If you are a Health and Safety Rep, you should find out whether your members are experiencing any problems in relation to this. You can do this when you are carrying out your health and safety inspection or by carrying out a workplace survey of your members. You may wish to use the following checklist to help you when you are planning your inspection.

- Has your employer included the risks associated with lone working in their risk assessment? Ask to see a copy of this.
- Have staff been provided with the necessary information and training to ensure that any risks associated with lone working are minimised? For example, do they know what to do in the event of a violent incident? Have they been trained on how to deal with chemicals and equipment safely?
- Are arrangements in place to ensure that lone workers are adequately supervised? Are arrangements in place to include and contact lone workers during emergency procedures?
- Do lone workers know how to summon assistance if they need it? Do they have access to the equipment they need to do this, eg, personal alarm or mobile phone?
- If working away from the school on a home visit, is there a procedure for reporting in and out? Is the home visitor's daily itinerary known?
- Are recommendations given about student/staff ratios in different situations?
- Are risk assessments regularly reviewed to ensure they are up to date?