TG1 Accessing high sided vehicles in the waste industry

Introduction

Why manage work on vehicles?

Three million people in Great Britain work on or near vehicles as part of their regular job. Getting on and off a vehicle to carry out loading/unloading operations and working at height on the vehicle are often viewed as incidental to the main job.

Because of this, the risks involved may not be properly considered by both workers and their managers. The economic and human cost of falls from vehicles that we know about was over £36 million in 2004/05.

High sided vehicles feature prominently in the waste industry. Refuse Collection Vehicles, container lorries, tankers, skip loaders and hook loaders, are all in everyday use and therefore require maintenance and access from time to time.

This guidance note is designed to assist those involved in the waste industry properly assess the risks to those who may need to access the tops or sides of high sided vehicles and therefore enable them to do so in a safe manner.

This guidance does not intend to interpret the law, nor does it aim to be comprehensive. It contains notes on good practice, which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do. The risks associated with your particular activities, and the methods of reducing those risks, should be identified during your risk assessment.

Background

Given the poor record of safety in the waste industry it is incumbent on employers to ensure that those who work on high sided vehicles are protected as far as is reasonably practicable from falls from height.

The Waste Industry Safety and Health forum in Northern Ireland (WISHNI) is committed to reducing accidents in the industry and in

consultation with the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland endeavour to deliver good practice guidance for employers.

Hazards

The hazards associated with accessing high sided vehicles are for the most part obvious and can often be overlooked. They include the following;

- Accessing the load area and/or catwalk
- Slips and trips when pushing or pulling loads/manual handling
- Job design pressures or constraints such as 'task and finish'
- Poor driver or assistant training leading to poor working practices
- Poorly maintained vehicle access systems such as catwalks, etc
- No systems for access forcing drivers to act unsafely
- Lack of awareness of site rules detailing loading/unloading
- Slippery surfaces on catwalks or other access areas
- Rainwater, ice or snow
- Weather conditions
- Lighting
- Road surface conditions

Assessing the risks

Assessing the risks from the practices you see and implementing effective control measures will help to reduce the chances of an accident happening. There are some simple steps you can take as follows:

- Identify the hazards.
- Identify those potentially at risk, e.g. your workers, the public (other road users and pedestrians), contractors, subcontractors, agency workers, temporary workers, etc.
- Assess the risks from those hazards, remembering that special consideration may be needed for people with disabilities, young people, etc.
- Eliminate or at least reduce the risks from those hazards so far as is reasonably practicable.
- Document your findings and communicate them to employees.

- Review your risk assessment regularly to ensure it is up to date as work practices can often change.

Preventing/controlling risk

Access on to vehicles should be restricted to those people who have to do so. To help control the risks consider the following:

- Is it possible to locate gauges and controls that are accessible from the ground to stop drivers climbing on top of vehicles?
- Is it possible to have permanent loading stations with fixed platforms?
- Is it practical to install an appropriate fall protection system?

Where people have to gain access to the top of a vehicle:

Access should be via a well-constructed ladder. Ladders should:

- Be placed on the front or back of the vehicle, as close to the relevant part of the vehicle as possible.
- Be of sound construction, properly maintained and securely fixed.
- Be vertical or slope inwards towards the top if possible.
- Rungs should be horizontal and give plenty of toe or foothold.

Wherever possible, walkways should be used. Walkways should:

- Be made of non-slip grating or another non-slip material.
- Top and middle guardrails may be needed, for protecting people working standing or crouching.
- Collapsible handrails are an option to be considered.

Operators may need to fit additional safety features such as those described, or find alternative means of access. If features are retrofitted, care will need to be taken that alterations do not affect the structural integrity of the equipment, or that the actual operation of retrofitting is safe (for example welding onto petrol tankers might be very unsafe).

When deciding on systems operators should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the systems available. Inertia reel systems (fall arrest) for example may be more suitable for accessing the vehicles from ground level whereas bi-line systems (fall restraint) may prevent falls from height but not assist with access to height.

Additional safety features such as those described in this guidance are available commercially.

Fall protection systems

There are several types of relevant personal fall protection systems and equipment. Users of these systems require high levels of training and appropriate close supervision:

work restraint systems and equipment will include a lanyard which must be adjusted, or set, to a fixed length to prevent the user physically getting to a place where they could fall. Examples include a bi-line system which restricts the travel of the user away from potentially hazardous areas e.g. an unprotected vehicle edge.

work positioning systems and equipment enable the user to work in tension or suspension to prevent or limit a fall, e.g. a cable or track-based system with attached lanyards too short to reach the danger area.

fall arrest systems and equipment limit the impact force of a fall on the user and prevent them hitting the ground, e.g. an inertia reel sometimes referred to as fall arrest blocks, these system operate a braking mechanism similar to that of a car seat belt.

You should only consider the use of personal fall protection equipment to prevent or minimise the consequences of a fall when collective preventive measures, e.g. scaffolds and protected platforms, are not practical.

Personal fall protection equipment that prevents a fall, e.g. a fall restraint system, should always take priority over personal equipment which only limits the height and/or consequences of a fall, e.g. a fall arrest system.[3]

Employers must ensure that the equipment purchased is carefully selected and meets relevant standards, is regularly checked and inspected and is carefully maintained.

Further reading

1. The Work at Height Safety Association, Technical Guidance Notes available online at: http://www.wahsa.co.uk/

2. Working at Height, HSE available online at: http://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/index.htm

3. Preventing falls from vehicles, HSE, available online at: http://www.hse.gov.uk/workplacetransport/vehicles/preventingfalls.htm