Information about

Safe work method statements

How to prepare and use a safe work method statement (SWMS) for high risk construction work (HRCW) and who needs to prepare one.

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Key concepts

Hazard - Something in, or that may be in, the work environment that has the potential to cause harm (injury, illness, including psychological illness, or death) to a person.

Risk - The chance (or likelihood) that a hazard will cause harm to a person.

Control measure - A thing, work process or system of work that controls the OHS hazard or risk.

The OHS Regulations 2007 (OHS Regulations) require employers and self-employed persons to prepare a **SWMS** before commencing 'high risk construction work' (HRCW), if that work poses a risk to the health or safety of any person including other persons on site or the public.

Note: Often there will be several employers that have employees carrying out construction work on a project (eg multiple contractors). The OHS Regulations apply to each one of these employers, as far as they control the work. Each employer must manage the risks to the health and safety of employees and sub-contractors who are within the employer's control and anyone else affected by their work.

What is high risk construction work (HRCW)?

The OHS Regulations prescribe 19 specific activities as HRCW, due to the significant potential for serious harm that is often associated with those activities. The 19 HRCW activities are construction work:

- where there is a risk of a person falling more than two metres
- on or adjacent to roadways or railways used by road or rail traffic
- in, over or adjacent to water or other liquids where there is a risk of drowning
- at workplaces where there is any movement of powered mobile plant
- structural alterations that require temporary support to prevent collapse
- in an area where there are artificial extremes of temperature
- on or near energised electrical installations or services
- involving a trench or shaft if the excavated depth is more than 1·5 metres
- on or near pressurised gas distribution mains or piping
- involving demolition
- involving a confined space
- on or near chemical, fuel or refrigerant lines
- involving tilt-up or precast concrete
- on telecommunications towers
- involving diving
- involving removal or likely disturbance of asbestos
- in an area that may have a contaminated or flammable atmosphere
- involving the use of explosives
- involving a tunnel.

What is a SWMS?

A SWMS is a safety planning tool that identifies the hazards and risks of HRCW and documents the control measures necessary to manage those risks. The SWMS should describe to workers in clear terms how risks from the work will be effectively controlled to enable the work to be done safely.

A sample SWMS template for HRCW is provided at Appendix A.

Who must prepare a SWMS?

The duty to prepare a SWMS before commencing HRCW rests with the employer of the employees (or the self-employed person) intending to undertake HRCW. However, in practice there will often be multiple employers to whom that duty applies (eg the builder and sub-contractors). In such cases, the sub-contractor is normally best positioned to understand and control the hazards and risks associated with the types of HRCW they are engaged to perform. A builder may however, agree to prepare the SWMS on behalf of or in conjunction with their sub-contractor, providing this is done in consultation with affected employees and their health and safety representatives (HSRs).

Example 1: *A builder and a bricklaying sub-contractor need to ensure a SWMS is prepared because their planned works involve temporary propping to prevent structural collapse (HRCW). The bricklaying contractor prepares the SWMS because they are most familiar with the activity, hazards, risks and potential controls; the builder then reviews the SWMS to make sure it is adequate before allowing the HRCW to commence.*

Example 2: *A self-employed excavator operator is to complete an excavation near a public footpath. The person is required to prepare a SWMS because the work involves risk to the health and safety of pedestrians, due to the movement of powered mobile plant (HRCW).*

What needs to be included in a SWMS?

As a minimum, the SWMS must:

a) identify work that is HRCW, and

b) state the hazards and risks to health and safety from that work, and

c) clearly detail the measures selected to control those risks, and

d) describe how the risk control measures will be implemented.

The SWMS should also identify the:

- date and location the HRCW is to be performed
- person/s responsible for ensuring selected risk controls are installed and maintained
- names of workers consulted in the document's preparation.

How do I prepare a SWMS?

This is a typical approach to developing a SWMS:

- assemble the relevant workers, their HSRs and supervisors; ideally at the location of proposed works. Note that there is a legal duty to consult affected employees and their HSRs when identifying hazards or measures to control risk
- review the proposed works and consider any site specific factors with potential to impact the works
- ensure all proposed HRCW activities are identified and hazards and risks listed
- select the risk control measures, and describe them alongside each of the hazards and risks that are listed.

Selecting risk control measures for HRCW

Where there is a risk to health or safety, first seek to **eliminate** that risk so far as is reasonably practicable (eg by having overhead powerlines de-energised).

If a risk cannot be eliminated, it must be reduced so far as is reasonably practicable, by implementing one (or a combination) of the following:

a) implementing any hazard-specific controls required by law

b) **substituting** a lower risk activity, procedure, plant, process or substance (eg using scaffold in preference to ladders)

c) **isolating** persons from the hazard (eg fence off areas for mobile plant operation)

d) using **engineering controls** (eg trench shields, guard rails, mechanical ventilation etc.).

Note: *This process should be used to control any risks that are not covered by specific duties in other parts of the OHS Regulations (eg traffic management and sun exposure). For how to control risks arising from hazards such as manual handling, noise, falls, confined spaces, plant and machinery, hazardous substances, asbestos and lead, see those sections of the OHS Regulations.*

If after implementation of the above controls so far as is reasonably practicable, a risk to health or safety still remains, reduce that risk, so far as is reasonably practicable, by using **administrative controls** (eg safety training, work instructions, warning signs, supervision).

If after implementation of administrative controls so far as is reasonably practicable, a risk to health or safety still remains, reduce that risk, so far as is reasonably practicable, by providing **personal protective equipment** (PPE) (eg hearing protection, high visibility clothing, respiratory protection) or a combination of appropriate PPE.

Example 3: *A contractor wins a job to restore a building façade; it is known there will be a risk of persons falling more than two metres (HRCW) so a SWMS will be required. The contractor consults with workers while developing the SWMS, and the group identifies:*

- *Part of the work can be completed from the ground using paint scraper and roller poles, therefore partially* ***eliminating*** *the risk of falls, however, a risk still remains.*
- *Where poles can't be used, scaffold will be used in preference to ladders, further reducing the risk of falls by* ***substituting*** *a more effective* ***engineering*** *control.*
- *A risk remains that persons could fall more than two metres if the scaffold is misused or any 'un-authorised' scaffold modifications occur. The risk will be further reduced by providing training to workers at a toolbox meeting, posting warning signs and ensuring workers are supervised appropriately (ie* ***administrative*** *controls).*

Can a SWMS address matters other than HRCW?

While there are broader duties to control all workplace hazards and risks, only hazards and risks that are directly related to prescribed HRCW activities need be included in a SWMS.

Example 4: *Workers are installing a roof and there is a risk of persons falling more than two metres. As this is HRCW, it must be addressed in a SWMS. There are also other hazards and risks associated with the work, such as sun exposure and manual handling. Such hazards and risks must still be appropriately managed, however, they don't need to be included in the SWMS because manual handling and sun exposure are not prescribed HRCW.*

Duty holders may still choose to address non-HRCW hazards and risks within a SWMS. But this should not compromise the intended focus on HRCW activities. If too much additional information is presented, the document may stop being effective in identifying and communicating how the HRCW risks will be controlled.

What is a 'generic' SWMS and are they acceptable?

'Generic' is a term widely used in industry to describe a pre-prepared SWMS which seeks to address a range of hazards that will potentially be encountered by workers during a particular work activity. A generic SWMS is not acceptable unless further work is done to make it 'site-specific'. This can be done by reviewing and revising it as necessary with regard to its suitability for the specific environment and circumstances in which the HRCW will be performed. Any such review and revision process should follow the steps outlined in the *'How do I prepare a SWMS'* section on page 2.

Are SWMS stored on an electronic device acceptable?

SWMS in an electronic format (eg on a smartphone) may be acceptable if the persons doing the work have ready access to the document for reference. Consideration should also be given to the format's capacity for revision (if required), and how appropriate worker consultation in the SWMS preparation process might be demonstrated.

Additional duties in relation to SWMS

- Duty holders (builder and sub-contractor) must ensure that once a SWMS has been developed and implemented, the HRCW to which it relates is performed in accordance with that SWMS.
- If a duty holder becomes aware that there is non-compliance with the SWMS, they must stop the HRCW immediately or as soon as it is safe to do so, and not allow it to resume until the SWMS is complied with or reviewed and revised as necessary.
- The SWMS must be reviewed and, if necessary, revised whenever the HRCW changes or if there is an indication that control measures are not adequately controlling the risks, including after any incident that occurs during HRCW.
- A copy of the SWMS must be retained for the duration of the HRCW.

Note: The SWMS should be kept available at the location of the HRCW, where it can be readily referenced by affected persons, or reviewed and revised as necessary.

Further guidance on SWMS

Further guidance on SWMS can be found in the WorkSafe publications:

- *Working safely in general construction*
- *Working safely in housing construction*
- *Controlling OHS hazards and risks*

Contact details

Call us on: 1800 136 089

Email us at: info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

For more information on occupational health and safety, go to **worksafe.vic.gov.au**

APPENDIX A – SAMPLE SWMS TEMPLATE FOR HIGH RISK CONSTRUCTION WORK (HRCW)

DUTIES: 1) A SWMS **must** be prepared if proposed works involve any of the HRCW activities listed below and that work poses a risk to the health and safety of any person. **2)** Affected employees and their HSRs must be consulted in the preparation of the SWMS. **3)** Once a SWMS has been developed and implemented, the HRCW to which it relates **must** be performed in accordance with the SWMS. **4)** Duty holders (builder and sub-contractor) **must** stop the HRCW immediately or as soon as it is safe to do so if the SWMS is not being complied with; the HRCW **must** not resume until the SWMS is complied with or reviewed and revised as necessary. **5)** The SWMS **must** be reviewed and if necessary, revised whenever the HRCW changes, or after any incident that occurs during HRCW, or if there is any indication that risk control measures are not adequately controlling the risks. **6)** An employer **must** retain a copy of the SWMS for the duration of the HRCW.

Direct employer:		**Principal contractor (PC)** *(Name and contact details)*	
Work supervisor: *(Name and contact details)*		**Date SWMS provided to PC:**	
Work activity: *(Job description)*		**Workplace and works location:**	

High risk construction work:	☐ Where there is a risk of a person falling more than two metres.	☐ On or adjacent to roadways or railways used by road or rail traffic.	☐ In, over or adjacent to water or other liquids where there is a risk of drowning.
	☐ At workplaces where there is any movement of powered mobile plant.	☐ Structural alterations that require temporary support to prevent collapse.	☐ In an area where there are artificial extremes of temperature.
	☐ On or near energised electrical installations or services.	☐ Involving a trench or shaft if the excavated depth is more than 1·5 metres.	☐ On or near pressurised gas distribution mains or piping.
	☐ Involving demolition.	☐ Involving a confined space.	☐ On or near chemical, fuel or refrigerant lines.
	☐ Involving tilt-up or precast concrete.	☐ On telecommunications towers.	☐ Involving diving.
	☐ Involving removal or likely disturbance of asbestos (note: preparation of an asbestos control plan is taken to be preparation of a SWMS).	☐ In an area that may have a contaminated or flammable atmosphere.	☐ Involving the use of explosives.
			☐ Involving a tunnel.

Person responsible for ensuring compliance with SWMS:		**Date SWMS received:**	
What measures are in place to ensure compliance with the SWMS? *(eg direct supervision, regular spot checks)*			
Person responsible for reviewing SWMS control measures *(eg PC's representative):*		**Date SWMS received by reviewer:**	
How will the SWMS control measures be reviewed?			
Review date:		**Reviewer's signature:**	

Selecting risk controls:

*Any risk to health or safety must be **eliminated**, or if that is not reasonably practicable, **reduced** so far as is reasonably practicable by:*

- *implementing any mandated controls specified by law (eg the OHS Regulations 2007)*
- *substituting a new activity, procedure, plant, process or substance (eg scaffold in preference to ladders)*
- *isolating persons from the hazard (eg fence off areas for mobile plant operation)*
- *using engineering controls (eg guard rails, trench shields) - or a combination of the above.*

If any risk to health or safety remains, it must be reduced by using:

- *administration controls (eg activity specific safety training, work instructions, warning signs)*
- *PPE such as respiratory protection, hardhats, high visibility clothing - or a combination of the above.*

More Effective

Less Effective

What are the tasks involved?	**What are the hazards and risks?**	**What are the risk control measures?**
List the work tasks in a logical order.	*What aspects of the work could harm workers or the public?*	*Describe what will be done to make the activity as safe as possible?*

Name of Worker	**Signature**	**Date**	**Name of Worker**	**Signature**	**Date**	**Name of Worker**	**Signature**	**Date**