

# Scaff Safe 2021 Findings Report

March – June 2021

## Background and overview

Falls from heights is the number one killer on NSW construction sites. Most serious and fatal falls are from roofs, ladders and scaffolds – and from a height of less than 4 metres.

Scaffolds that are not built to standard or have key components missing, pose falls from heights and collapse risks. NSW worker's compensation claims for the three years to 2020/21 highlights that scaffolds continue to be in the top three that construction workers fall from.<sup>1</sup>

SafeWork NSW has targeted scaffold safety through dedicated pro-active inspector visits since 2017. These visits have focussed on the safe erection, alteration, dismantling and use of scaffold, as well as the responsibilities of the principal contractor to ensure a scaffold is safe for the entirety of the construction project.

This report provides a summary of the findings from construction site visits that were undertaken state-wide between 22 March – 13 June 2021, for the Scaff Safe 2021 inspector visit program and campaign.

<sup>1</sup> Workers Compensation Construction Industry Major Falls from Heights Claims by Breakdown Agency 2018/19 – 20/21

# Communications campaign and focus

Scaff Safe 2021 was built upon the previous year’s visit findings, where inspectors observed improvements across some of our focus areas. However, there were continued safety concerns regarding missing components, gaps, and scaffolds being altered by unlicensed trades.

The 2021 campaign messaging focussed on increasing site supervisor and principal contractor’s understanding of the penalties associated with unsafe scaffolds and their obligations to:

- ensure scaffolds are complete, structurally sound, compliant and safe throughout the construction project
- stop alterations by unlicensed workers
- obtain written confirmation (such as a handover certificate) from a competent person before use
- ensure 30-day inspections occur and a record of the inspection is obtained
- stop unauthorised access to incomplete or unsafe scaffolds.

Key campaign messaging was disseminated via a Ministerial media release, email to industry associations, unions and other interested stakeholders, Facebook and LinkedIn advertisements, SMS to 11,000 scaffolding high risk work licence holders, a SafeWork NSW front page website scroller, SafetyCast (podcast) and dedicated staff signature block.

**Facebook and LinkedIn campaigns**

Combined reach of **234,359**

Resulting in **1,073** clicks

# Inspector site visits

SafeWork NSW inspectors visited 438 construction sites state-wide, with the majority being on house construction sites (54%), followed by mid-high rise (17%) and then commercial (15%). The “other” site type classification included solar installations, schools, and community housing. As with previous years, the safety levels observed by inspectors on construction sites remains unacceptable when it comes to exposing workers to scaffold falls from heights and collapse risks, particularly on house construction sites.

# Type of construction site




Graph 1: Number of visits undertaken by inspectors as part of Scaff Safe 2021, broken down by type of site.


# Notices and fines

- Improvement notices are issued to remedy systems of work or hazards that do not pose a serious and immediate or imminent risk to any person’s health or safety.
- A prohibition notice ceases the workplace activity and is issued if an activity is occurring at the workplace that involves a serious risk to the health and safety of a person.
- On-the-spot fines can be issued if there is a serious or imminent risk, or if the business is a repeat offender.

**40%** of the notices and penalties wissued were on house construction sites.

**52%** of the notices were issued for non-compliant scaffolds or fall hazards.

 **\$70,992 Fines**

 **625 Notices**

# Inspector checklist observations

Inspectors completed a safety checklist on all sites, covering predominantly scaffold falls risks, stability, use, maintenance and management. Inspectors provided advice and assistance where required and addressed any other safety risks as observed.

## Falls from heights risks

Many scaffold falls from heights occur because there are components missing or unsecured, and workers fall through the gaps. In many cases, the scaffold has missing components because unlicensed workers have removed them to access parts of the building or structure.

During Scaff Safe 2021, inspectors observed an unacceptable level of missing components on scaffolds, including missing ledgers, planks, hop-ups, mid rails and handrails.

**43%** of sites had working decks with missing ledgers, planks or hop-ups.

**43%** of sites did not have all mid rails installed.

**36%** of sites did not have all handrails installed.

**30%** of sites did not have all lap boards lashed/secured.

**29%** of sites had gaps between the scaffold platforms and building edge/face that were greater than 225mm (horizontal).

**28%** of sites had missing toe boards/brick guards.

**26%** of sites had gaps between the hop-ups/decks and building floor that were greater than 300mm (vertical).

**24%** of sites did not have safe access to working decks.



Picture 1: Scaffold with missing planks

Some of sites did not have all lap boards lashed/secured

**91%** of sites had working decks clear of materials to provide safe access (min 450mm).

**90%** of sites had decks every two metres (not more than three) to ensure scaffolders are protected from falls.

## Scaffold collapse risks

For scaffold stability, lack of vehicular protection and inadequate ties were the highest risks observed by inspectors.

**23%** of sites had no vehicular protection where it was required.

**23%** of sites did not have adequate ties installed.

**13%** of sites did not have adequate bracing.

There were some higher compliance levels for scaffold stability checklist questions.

**96%** of sites had loads on scaffold that were within rated capacity.

**93%** of sites had scaffolds that were erected on solid foundations.

**90%** of sites where scaffolds had containment sheeting/netting had accounted for wind loading.



Picture 2: Scaffold on an unstable foundation.

## Scaffold use risks

The principal contractor and site supervisors have critical roles and obligations to ensure the safety of workers when using scaffolds. This includes ensuring the scaffolds remain safe and compliant for the duration of the construction project and that workers are not accessing incomplete sections.

Inspectors observed poor compliance when it came to access of unsafe scaffolds and written confirmations (handover certificates).

**49%** of sites had principal contractors who did not prevent workers accessing incomplete scaffolds.

**32%** of sites did not have written confirmation (e.g., handover certificate) that a competent person had inspected the scaffold.

**22%** of sites had not had their scaffold inspected by a competent person within the last 30 days.

**16%** of sites did not have safeguards in place for overhead powerlines.



Picture 3: Workers accessing incomplete scaffold and misusing it.

## Focus on: Unlicensed workers tampering with scaffolds

A scaffolding high risk work licence is required when erecting, altering or dismantling scaffolds where a person or object could fall more than 4 metres.

Unlicensed workers removing scaffold components continues to be a concern for SafeWork NSW, as this tampering can lead to falls from heights or scaffold collapse.

Inspectors observed that the most likely trades to tamper with a scaffold were bricklayers, carpenters and renderers.

**30%** of sites had scaffolds that had been altered by unlicensed tradies.

**26%** of sites had principal contractors who did not communicate to workers that scaffolds must not be altered by an unlicensed person.



Picture 4: Scaffold with mid rail removed.

## Conclusion

Falls from heights remains the primary cause of traumatic fatalities on NSW construction sites.

While there were some positive safety observations by inspectors, many sites had an unacceptable level of risk when it comes to workers being exposed to falls and scaffold collapse risks due to unsafe scaffolds, particularly on house construction sites.

Principal contractors and site supervisors have duties under work health and safety laws to ensure that worker's lives are not placed at risk from unsafe scaffolds. This means adequately planning for safety and managing the life-cycle of the scaffold to ensure it remains safe and compliant for the duration of the construction project, including during the finishing stages where additional access to the façade may be required. Principal contractors also have a duty to supervise, consult and communicate with workers about how they can work safely with scaffolds, and ensuring workers using the scaffold do not remove scaffold components if they are not licenced to do so.

Scaffold suppliers and installers must ensure the scaffolds they supply are fit for purpose and compliant with the appropriate Australian Standards, safe work guidance and work health and safety legislation. This means ensuring scaffolds are built by licenced and competent scaffolders, they are appropriate for the project and site, and there is adequate communication with principal contractors to ensure the scaffold is altered where necessary as the build progresses so it remains in a safe condition from handover through to the finalisation of the construction project.

Workers who use scaffolds must not alter or tamper with a scaffold if they do not hold a scaffolding high risk work licence, and must not misuse the scaffold.

SafeWork NSW will continue to focus on scaffold safety, including following-up with those principal contractors who received multiple notices during Scaff Safe 2021. We will also continue to work with industry to target falls from heights and scaffold collapse risks in the NSW construction industry.

For more information on how to manage scaffolds safely on construction sites, see the recently released [Scaffold Industry Safety Standard](#).

The safety standard and other guidance is available on the scaffolding safety page at [www.safework.nsw.gov.au](http://www.safework.nsw.gov.au).

Download a simple scaffold safety checklist

Hold a scaffold safety toolbox talk

Download the pocket guide or order your hard copy version:

Download the Scaffold Industry Safety Standard

Check out our scaffold handover certificate example



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