

Working Safely in Cold Weather Conditions

Advice to employers

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has said employers must be flexible during harsh weather conditions, such as snow and ice, and should not force staff to “risk life and limb” getting to work. When such weather conditions occur this can result in schools across the country closing, leaving many parents with child care problems. In severe weather conditions trains can be cancelled and motorists are often warned only to make essential journeys. In such circumstances staff may be unable to get to work. Whilst many people may not be able to travel to their workplaces, business does not have to stop entirely in such circumstances. With good business continuity and safety policies in place, together with a good communication system, businesses can continue to operate.

During periods of extreme cold weather, employers have many things to consider including safety within the workplace, minimum temperatures, arrangements if the workplace needs to close, business continuity, the safety of employees (plus the general public and contractors) and ensuring good communication. These aspects feature in more detail below. It may be necessary to make quick decisions about closing the workplace or sending people home. Such decisions should be made considering the likelihood and severity of risks and hazards, with the aim of ensuring safety as far as is reasonably practicable. Directors may wish to make decisions in conjunction with health and safety advisers, employee representatives and facilities managers.

Advice to those with responsibility for health and safety

At times of extreme and dangerous weather it is essential that communication is retained throughout the workforce. Staff must be instructed as to what the employer's policy is, how to follow it and who to communicate with if they have any queries. A number of health and safety issues may need to be addressed:

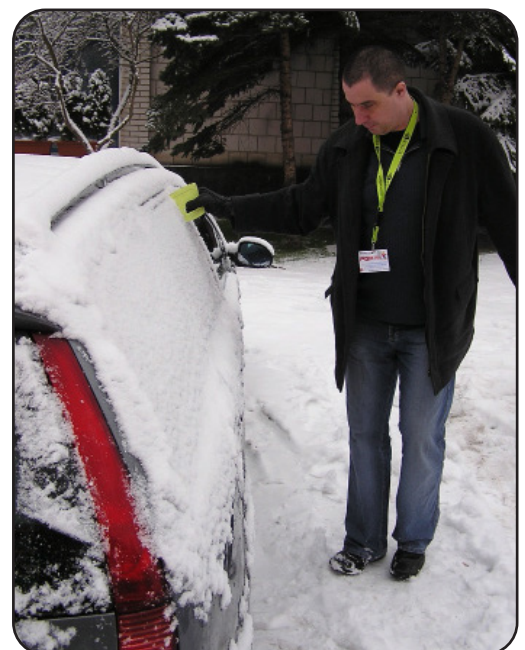
Risk assessment – it must be made clear who takes the final decision in times of bad weather, in terms of when people should leave the workplace or if a workplace should close down entirely for a specified period. The five stages of risk assessment should be applied, as always, and a decision made by a competent person.

Safety in the workplace – with fewer people in the workplace, lone working situations may arise, and it should be ensured that communication is maintained with any employees in this situation and that non-essential high risk tasks are avoided. Consideration should also be given to vulnerable workers such as pregnant and disabled employees.

Emergency arrangements – due to low staffing levels, consideration needs to be given to arrangements for dealing with emergencies such as failures of safety critical systems, persons trapped in lifts, first aid incidents, fire evacuations, power failures, workplace temperatures falling below the minimum guidelines, etc (See the ‘Key considerations’ box).

Key considerations

- Communication is important, make sure everyone is kept informed of changes.
- Contractors, freelancers and part-time workers must also be considered.
- It is important to consider inside temperature and comfort for staff. Workplaces should not drop below 16 degrees Celsius (13 degrees Celsius where work requires severe physical effort). The Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) suggests a range from 20°C to 24°C for offices involving sedentary tasks.
- Snow and ice are hazards that may result in slips, trips and falls. Advise staff of the correct footwear, use signage where possible and ensure that icy surfaces are gritted accordingly.
- Driving to and from the workplace can be dangerous in times of extreme weather.



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Advice to those with responsibility for health and safety (cont.)

Working from home – home working might be seen as a solution, and since the Covid-19 pandemic is now more widely practised. However, employers should be aware that it is also their responsibility to ensure their employees' health and safety if they are working from home. Home working risk assessments should be undertaken to ensure employees are able to comfortably and safely work from home. It is often best to undertake these on the potential working environment as part of contingency planning before bad weather strikes and to preempt a potential national emergency (eg, the Covid-19 pandemic).

Driving for work – it should be ensured drivers are allowed extra time to complete journeys and factor in alternative routes, and that they are not pressurised to complete any journeys made dangerously difficult by the weather. Company vehicles should be provided with suitable equipment for the conditions, eg. winter tyres.

Slips, trips and falls – walking to and from car parks or between buildings at work during severe weather requires special attention to avoid slipping and falling. Slips and falls are some of the most frequent types of injuries during the winter months. Employees should be reminded to avoid boots or shoes with smooth soles and heels, such as plastic and leather soles, and instead wear a pair of well insulated boots with good rubber treads and to walk slowly and with shorter steps when on icy surfaces. Main pathways and steps should be cleared as far as possible of snow and ice to allow safe access to buildings. Employees should be reminded to remove as much snow and water from their boots as they can when entering buildings as water from melting ice on the floor can also lead to slippery conditions.

Updates – any news specific to the organisation should be sent out by email and published on any intranet sites.

Employees trapped at work – employers should keep an eye on the weather throughout the day, taking care that employees don't get trapped at work and put at risk if snow starts to fall. Communication needs to be in place to ensure a work place can be closed down relatively quickly if necessary. It is also worth having in place contingency plans should employees be trapped at work or unable to travel home.

Contractors – it is important to consider contractors, freelancers and part time staff. Make sure you have contact details for all people who usually work within your workplace.

Members of the public – ensure that suitable and sufficient signage is displayed to inform the public of important information.

PPE – if outdoor working is required, ensure that suitable and sufficient PPE is provided, including suitable gloves. Systems of work for outdoor activities should take account of reasonably foreseeable poor weather.

Further information

- The TUC has also advised companies to ensure they have a bad weather policy, which sets out what is expected of staff and what they should do when snow, ice and a lack of transport prevents them from getting to work. A model policy is available, which can be tailored-made to your company's needs.
- Information on weather conditions is available from the Met Office at: <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/> or local radio broadcasts.
- Public transport service updates and information on disruptions due to the snow and ice conditions are available on rail and bus operator's websites. Traffic updates and important travel information can be found at: <http://www.theaa.com/>
- Information on workplace temperatures is available: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/employer/managing.htm>

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Steps to minimise disruption

If employees cannot get to work because of bad weather, then ACAS recommends actions that can be taken by both employees and the employer that will help mitigate disruption to operations whilst keeping people safe.

In addition to keeping their employer informed, employees are advised to check:

- They have what they need to be able to work from home, if this is an option.
- Any other ways to travel to work, if this is practical.
- Their clients or customers know the situation, so as to set expectations.
- If any urgent work needs covering.
- If they can make any other care arrangements for children or dependants where necessary.

ACAS recommends that employers adopt a flexible approach in the face of severe weather conditions and suggests that employers could agree to staff:

- Coming in later that day if the weather or transport problem is expected to get better.
- Working flexibly so they can make up any lost working time.
- Working from home or adjusting a hybrid working agreement.
- Swapping shifts with those who can get in more easily.
- Changing duties temporarily to those that can still be carried out.
- Taking the time off as paid holiday.

Any such arrangements should be non-discriminatory, consistent and take account of individual circumstances (eg. someone with a health condition).

Source: ACAS (2023).

Business continuity planning

Companies may wish to consider developing a Business Continuity Strategy and a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) to cover situations such as their business being unable to operate due to a disruptive incident – in this case, extreme weather. A BCP will improve the resilience of a business and mean that an unplanned event will not completely derail its operation. In effect, the critical operations of the business will continue to function in most circumstances – subject of course to certain limitations.

Business continuity planning requires:

- Identification of potential threats to a business' normal operation.
 - Determining how that threat/those threats could adversely impact the business (business impact analysis).
 - Designing measures and procedures to address the risks and to facilitate business recovery.
 - Testing and reviewing BCP effectiveness.
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