Safe scaffold step height during construction work

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Foreword

This practical guide is designed to help contractors and workers meet their safety duties, and to ensure the health and safety of all persons involved in the construction industry. It provides advice on the Queensland Government's compliance approach to scaffold-step height requirements for scaffold bays, including bay extension platforms (such as hop-up platforms used for access).

Note–photos and diagrams in this document are used for the purpose of illustrating issues relating to scaffold step heights only. Other requirements may apply in relation to scaffold integrity, slips, trips and falls, and falling objects.

Scaffold bays

Safe scaffold step height

Scaffolding is a temporary structure specifically erected to support access or working platforms. Scaffold bays can be erected in a tiered arrangement so work can be performed on building faces that are raked or tiered.

Excessive step heights mostly used for access and egress increases the risk of trips and falls which can result in musculoskeletal or other injuries.

When modular or prefabricated scaffolds are erected in a tiered arrangement, it can result in an excessive step height. These standard scaffolds are typically manufactured with connection points at approximately 500mm intervals, resulting in a step height between scaffold bays of 500mm or greater. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Modular scaffold bays with unsafe 500mm step height

Bay extension platforms (hop-up platforms) are often erected to be at level with building floors or slabs, to change the working height of a lift, or to increase the width of the platform. When a hop-up platform is erected at the connection point directly above or below an adjacent scaffold bay platform (see Figure 2), this can result in a 500mm scaffold-step height which may be excessive when mostly used for access and egress.

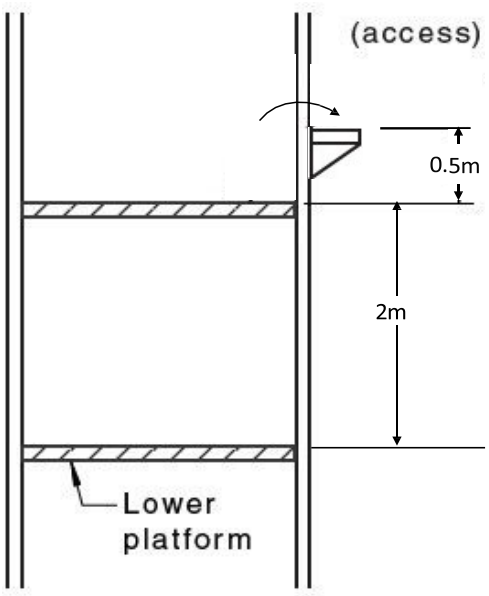

Figure 2 – hop-up platform above and below the scaffold bay platform (AS/NZS 1576.1 Figure 3.6.2)

Compliance position

This guidance has been designed to align with, and rely on, the principles and benchmarks provided in the workplace health and safety legislation for scaffold-step heights along scaffold bays which are commonly used for access and egress.

Step heights mostly used for access and egress shouldn't exceed 300mm so far as is reasonably practicable (see below for more information regarding access to hop-up platforms used as a working bay).

Keeping steps at this height reduces the risk of trips and falls which can result in musculoskeletal or other injuries.

WHS legislation supporting the compliance position

Work Health and Safety Act and Regulation

Work health and safety laws aim to protect the health, safety and welfare of all workers at work. The laws also protect the health and safety of all other people who might be affected by the work.

Queensland's work health and safety legal framework includes:

- the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (WHS Act)
- the Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (WHS Regulation)
- codes of practice.

Section 26A of the WHS Act (Duty of persons conducting business or undertaking–Code of Practice), requires that a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) must comply with a code, or manage hazards and risks arising from the work carried out, in a way that's different to the code but provides a standard of health and safety equivalent to, or higher than, the standard required under the Code.

Section 40(a) in the WHS Regulation (Duty in relation to general workplace facilities), requires that a PCBU must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the workplace layout and maintenance allow people to enter and exit and move about without risk to health and safety–under normal working conditions and in an emergency.

Scaffolding Code of Practice

The Scaffolding Code of Practice 2021 (the Code) provides information about safe access and egress (section 2.7.1) and step heights (section 2.7.1.1) within scaffolding systems.

The information in the Code relates to step heights and includes:

- rises in temporary stairways
- scaffold stair systems and any difference in step heights arising from changes in directions between landings (such as to or from a scaffold stair system and a scaffold platform or an access or egress point).

It's important to note, the acceptable step heights outlined in these provisions ranges from a maximum of 225mm rise on temporary stairways, and 300mm for a change in direction between landings where there's a difference from the scaffold stair to an access or egress point.

Australian Standards

Information on step heights is provided in Australian Standard *AS 4576:2020 Guidelines for scaffolding* (AS4576), clause 7.9.3–Stairs, which (although not directly related to access between bays), states "the step down from the lowest landing to the ground should not exceed 300mm."

Australian/New Zealand Standard *AS/NZ1576.1:2019 Scaffolding Part 1: General requirements* (AS/NZS1576.1), clause 3.6.2–Location requirements of bay extension platforms, provides guidance on bay extension platforms and states (in part):

- Where the bay extension platform is located not greater than 500mm above or below an adjacent fully decked bay platform, access is not required between the platforms.
- Where the bay extension is located greater than 500mm above or below an adjacent fully decked bay platform, access shall be provided to the bay extension platform from the adjacent bay platform.

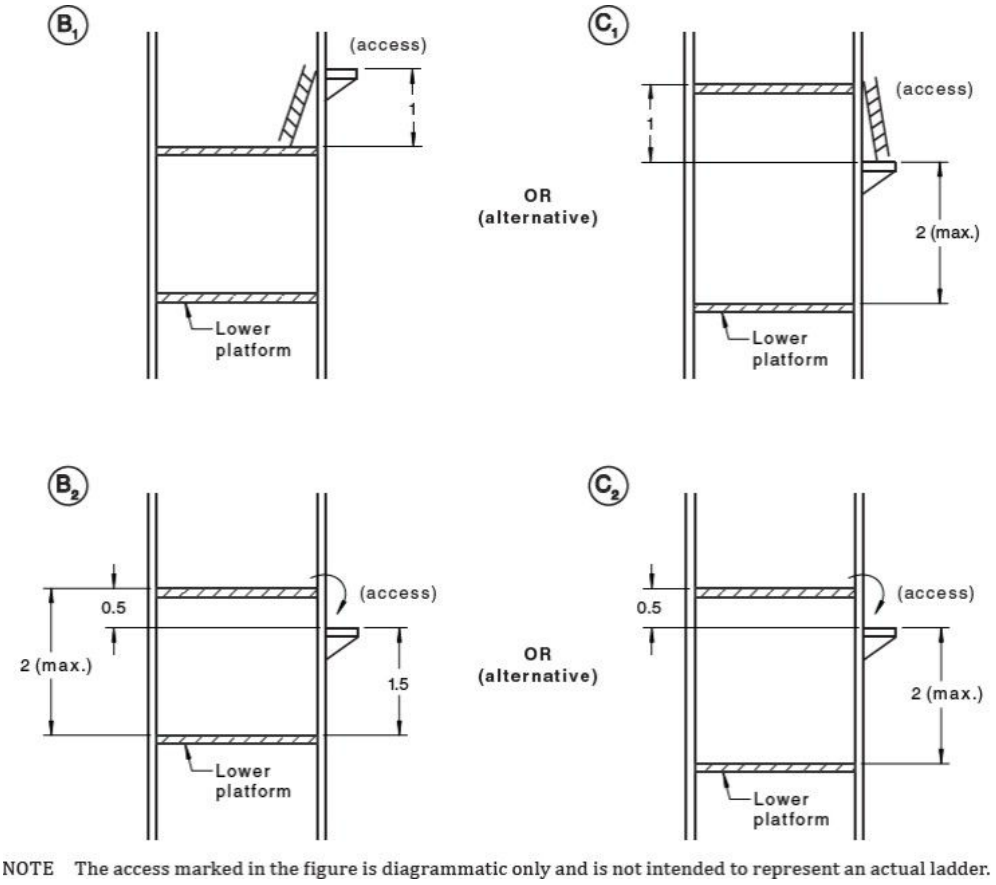

Figure 3 – Location of bay extension platforms (AS/NZS 1576.1 Figure 3.6.2)

Expectations and compliance

Having modular scaffold components available (such as stepdown brackets, or similar control measures), provides a reasonably practicable way to manage and minimise the scaffold-step height between tiered bays to be 300mm or less.

Figures 4, 5, and 6 below are examples of steps constructed from a range of scaffold components.

A stepdown bracket (single or double) does not constitute the creation of a ‘stairway flight’ as defined in section 1.3.54 of AS/NZS 1576.1. Therefore, the requirements of AS/NZS1576.1 section 3.11.3 are not applicable in this circumstance.

When installing stepdown brackets, scaffolders should ensure the step heights between the two platforms are consistent. If it’s not reasonably practicable to maintain consistent step heights between the two platforms, a method of highlighting the step should be used (for example, using a contrasting colour like yellow slip resistant tape along the step nosing). However, having inconsistent step heights isn’t preferred as it could increase the risk of a misstep which could lead to a potential trip and/or fall.

Hop-up platforms primarily used for access

The 300mm step height requirement applies when a hop up platform is being used primarily for access and egress.

Hop-up platforms mainly used as working bays

The step height from a hop-up platform to a scaffold bay platform can be 500mm when it is mainly used as a working bay. For hop-up platforms that are located one metre (or more) from the adjacent scaffold bay platform, general safe access and egress requirements apply–refer to AS4576 section 7.9 and AS/NZS1576.1 sections 3.6 and 3.11 for further information.

Note–while workers can move between the hop-up platform and the scaffold bay platform, it's not considered a throughfare or access point and shouldn't be used this way.

Figure 4 – stepdown bracket constructed from tube and coupler scaffolding

Figure 5– single step step-down bracket

Figure 6 – two step step-down bracket

Further guidance

- Scaffolding Code of Practice 2021
- *Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act)*
- Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011

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