A practical guide for high-risk construction work

Independent demonstration module based on public Safe Work Australia guidance.

8-10 min learning module

Audience
PCBUs, supervisors and workers

Source
Construction Work Code of Practice

Why a SWMS exists

The aim is safe work, not paperwork.

Primary purpose

Help PCBUs, supervisors and workers implement and monitor the control measures that keep high-risk construction work safe.

Written control plan

A SWMS identifies the high-risk work, hazards and risks, risk controls, and how those controls will be implemented, monitored and reviewed.

PLAIN LANGUAGE MEANING

A good SWMS tells people what risky work is happening, what could go wrong, what controls are required, and how the team will check the controls are working.

When is a SWMS required?

A SWMS is required for high-risk construction work.

Examples of high-risk construction work include:

risk of a person falling more than 2 metres
work in or near a confined space
work in or near a trench deeper than 1.5 metres
work on or near energised electrical installations or services
work in an area with movement of powered mobile plant
work involving, or likely to involve, disturbance of asbestos

Important

The trigger is not whether the task feels dangerous. The trigger is whether it falls within high-risk construction work as defined under the WHS Regulations.

Local differences can apply. Always check the relevant jurisdiction and regulator guidance.

Who prepares it?

Responsibilities need to be settled before work starts.

PCBU duty

The PCBU carrying out the high-risk construction work must prepare a SWMS, or ensure one has been prepared, before the work starts.

Preparation + consultation

The person responsible for carrying out the high-risk work is best placed to prepare it. Workers and their health and safety representatives, if any, must be consulted.

Coordination

Where more than one PCBU has the duty, they must consult and cooperate with each other to coordinate who will actually prepare it.

PROJECT INTERFACE

For high-risk work on a construction project, the principal contractor must be provided with the SWMS before the high-risk work starts.

What must a SWMS cover?

Use the source document as a control map.

1	2	3	4	5
High-risk activities What work is being done?	Hazards and risks What could cause harm?	Control measures What will control the risk?	Implementation How will controls be used?	Monitoring and review How will controls stay effective?

If the SWMS does not tell a worker what to do and how controls will be checked, it is probably too vague.

Control measures must be specific

Vague instructions do not control risk.

Weak wording

Use appropriate PPE.
Be careful near mobile plant.
Follow site rules.

Stronger wording

Wear high visibility clothing in the plant movement zone.
Use physical barriers to separate pedestrians and plant.
Confirm exclusion-zone controls at the pre-start briefing.

HIERARCHY OF CONTROL

Consider elimination first, then substitution, isolation and engineering controls, then administrative controls, then PPE for remaining risk.

Generic is not enough

A SWMS must fit the actual workplace.

A generic SWMS can be used for regular high-risk work, but it must be reviewed for the specific workplace and revised if needed.

WORKPLACE LAYOUT	Access, storage, traffic, nearby services
WORKERS	Literacy, language, experience, supervision needs
WORK METHOD	Plant, sequence, interface with other trades
PROJECT INFORMATION	Design information, WHS management plan, notifiable work

Implement, monitor and review

A SWMS is live during the work.

Brief	Observe	Stop	Review	Keep
Brief each team member before work begins.	Watch work being carried out and monitor compliance.	Stop work immediately, or as soon as it is safe, if the SWMS is not being followed.	Review when work, location, hazards or controls change.	Keep the SWMS available for the required period.

Review triggers include changed work, changed location, new hazard information, a notifiable incident, inadequate controls, or the SWMS not being followed.

Scenario: is this good enough?

A quick test of whether the SWMS is usable.

Scenario

A subcontractor submits a SWMS for work near powered mobile plant. Under control measures it says: “Use appropriate PPE and stay alert around vehicles.”

Best response

Do not treat the control as complete. Ask for specific controls that state how people and plant will be separated, how the exclusion zone will be managed, what PPE is required, and how the controls will be monitored.

Why

A SWMS should give clear direction. Workers and supervisors should not be left to invent the control measures on the day.

Three points to carry into the work

A SWMS is only useful if it changes what happens on site.

Be specific
Name the activity, hazard, control measure and monitoring process clearly.

Be local
Review generic material for the actual workplace, workers, sequencing and interfaces.

Be active
Brief, monitor, stop, revise and keep the SWMS available when required.

Source note

Primary source: Safe Work Australia, Model Code of Practice: Construction Work, November 2024. This independent demonstration was prepared by Plainward from publicly available guidance. It was not commissioned, approved or endorsed by Safe Work Australia. Local WHS requirements should be checked with the relevant regulator.