

Rt Hon Jane Kennedy MP, Minister of State for Work

Health and Safety Commission open meeting 12 October 2004

Health and safety - three words, so widely understood and accepted by almost everybody in the UK today. This is testament to the commitment of the Health and Safety Commission and Executive, and local authorities whose energy has helped to achieve safer and healthier workplaces.

We have come a long way. Only 30 years ago there were three times the number of fatalities there are today (*1974 – 651 fatalities to employees in production and some service industries, compared with 182 fatalities in 2002/03*). When asked what their corporate priorities are, industrial workers will more often say 'safety' first. A recent MORI survey commissioned by HSE indicated that the vast majority of workers felt their workplaces were safe.

Such understanding and appreciation of the moral and business case for good health and safety is a tremendous achievement, for the Commission, the Executive, and to all those contributing to the delivery of improved health and safety standards.

But we are now entering a new era and the goal posts have moved. Before 1974, we had a baseline laid down by inflexible, 'prescriptive' legislation. Lord Robens, asked to review health and safety regulation, recognised this and the scope for improvement. His groundbreaking report led to a new 'goal setting' approach to regulation, with the Health and Safety at Work Act, and the formation of the Commission and Executive.

Then, as now, improvements in health and safety performance had reached a plateau following steady improvement over the preceding years. He made his pivotal recommendations, and with impressive foresight, recognised that the needs of the system might in the future be different to that which was needed in his time. And here we are in the future. Once again safety improvements have reached a plateau and occupational ill health is increasing. This, the result of a changing industrial landscape, a general shift from

manufacturing to the service sector, and an increase in the numbers of small businesses – now approaching 4 million and predicted to grow still further.

So we face a new challenge – to identify the modern needs of the system as Robens did 30 years ago; deliver better results on occupational health; and re-energise safety improvement achieved through greater understanding. The Commission's new strategy is designed to do just that - with a clear focus on delivering improvements. Launched 8 months ago, we are already seeing progress with 5 of the 9 early deliverables already achieved.

HSE has, for example, recently published a statement with proposals for accessible channels of advice. This is a direct response to the businesses who told us that they respected and valued HSE's advice, but feared contacting them. The statement clearly outlines how HSE's information services will be developed, and how working with and through others will be maximised.

This is a developing theme with several pilot occupational health and safety support schemes set up in the last year. For example, in Kirklees, HSE has facilitated a partnership between the metropolitan council, three local primary care trusts and Job Centre Plus. This provides a local and free occupational health, safety and rehabilitation support service for use by local businesses. HSE is considering how to increase such access to occupational health and safety support for organisations who do not currently use it.

But that's just the start – we're at the beginning of a new era. The Commission and Executive are reorganising, shaping themselves to play their part. Others need to do the same including industry, Government, local authorities, and all who share responsibility.

The strategy has just taken off, slow in its impact at first but gathering speed all the time. Like the changes 30 years ago, I am confident that the strategy will really start to deliver.

We want to get to a position where there is:

- Widespread appreciation of risk management and the business case for health and safety, especially amongst small businesses – the result of improved understanding and education;
- More focussed and targeted interventions from HSE, including robust enforcement where necessary – taking measured business risks that are controlled and well managed, and
- Better control of risks at the sharp end where they are created, secured through greater worker involvement. An HSE statement published in March this year identifies how this will be achieved through initiatives to reach out to and involve workers.

The government, as an employer, must also play its part in driving up improved health and safety standards.

In Great Britain around 40 million working days are lost annually due to work related ill health and injuries, costing employers between 4 and 8 Billion pounds. Ill health caused or made worse by either work related stress or musculoskeletal disorders accounted for nearly 2 out of every 3 absences. In my own department, DWP, for example, the average sickness absence is 10.8 days per year.

It is not just the cost to the exchequer and to industry. The impact on workers and their families is just as great.

So, Government has a responsibility to tackle this issue. I chair a new Ministerial task force to provide the lead and accountability for public sector improvements in the management of health, not only for Government as an employer, but as a procurer of goods and services, and as a standard setter.

The Commission's new strategy comes at a time of spotlight attention for the Commission and Executive. They have been the focus of an Inquiry by the Work and Pensions Select

Committee. Its findings praise HSE's high quality and commendable record, and support the legislative framework that has been the cornerstone of their success. I acknowledge the report also includes constructive criticism and recommendations. These have been carefully considered, and we are hoping that our response will be published soon.

So, we should celebrate the success of the last 30 years, and look forward to the next 30 years, recognising there is still a big job to do, and striving for greater achievement.

What will the future look like? I see the Health and Safety Commission developing its non-executive oversight of the Executive. HSE itself will evolve, with a greater focus on delivering healthier and safer workplaces through others, including HSE's major regulatory partners, local authorities and closer and better working relationship with other regulators.

Health and Safety will continue to be seen as a cornerstone of a civilised society. Government, industry and workers will all be committed to this goal.

I'd like to thank the Commission for inviting me to speak, and for giving me the opportunity to present you with the Government's perspective. I'm sure the rest of the day's events will be very interesting, providing valuable insight into the decision making process of the Commission and how they are shaping the organisation for the future.