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HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMISSION

HSE's website on the management of reasonable temperatures in the workplace

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Issue

1. The revision of the HSE website on the management of reasonable temperatures in the workplace. Following consultation, the revised website contains comprehensive guidance on managing hot and cold temperatures at work.

Timing

2. The final version of the website will be available from the end of August 2006.

Recommendation

3. For information.

Background

4. HSC considered the issue of maximum temperatures in the workplace as part of a wider discussion on the Workplace Regulations in November 2003 (HSC/03/123). This was in response to a campaign to introduce a legal maximum temperature in the workplace led, in the main, by the musicians' and bakers' unions. There is already guidance on a minimum temperature.
5. HSC accepted the argument that it would be impracticable to set a universal maximum working temperature given the numerous and complex factors to be considered such as ventilation, humidity, temperature, the work involved, the person undertaking the work and what they may be wearing. Although not a strategic priority, HSC asked HSE, in dialogue with the social partners, to explore what further advice could be offered on the management of workplace temperatures to a reasonable standard. Most of the work has focused on the management of hot temperatures at work although the website also includes guidance on work in cold temperatures.
6. HSE held a seminar entitled "Managing Thermal Comfort in The Workplace" on 11 March 2005. It involved stakeholders such as trade unions, industry and other technical specialists to discuss and clarify the concerns. Guidance was developed

which provides a step-by step approach to mitigate the effects of extreme weather and manage hot temperatures resulting from the work process. At the seminar, HSE introduced a trial version of the website and asked those present to try it out with a view to refining it. The website provides guidance to assess, manage and control workplace temperatures to a reasonable standard. In addition to the guidance there will also be a thermal environment tool to assist in measuring and predicting the thermal comfort of workers in each work environment based on the information it is given. The tool will be available on the website later in the year.

7. The trial version of the website has been available on HSE's website since last summer seeking feedback. There were over 60 responses and overall strong support for the concept although a third of them asked general questions about temperatures in their workplaces rather than commenting on the content of the site. The main request was to introduce more advice on working in cold temperatures, which has been done.

Argument

8. For the reasons explained in paragraph 5 introducing a maximum temperature in the workplace remains an inappropriate and impracticable approach. HSE has received more queries, approximately 90, about working in hot temperatures during the excessively hot summer weeks. This is to be expected. The revised website will help employers manage hot and cold temperatures in the workplace better and give employees a greater understanding of what the issues are.

Consultation

9. Employers, industry representatives, stakeholders, trade unions, particularly those with an interest in workplace temperatures such as the bakers' and musicians' unions and associations and technical specialists were invited to the seminar on 11 March 2005 and contributed to the consultation process. The General Federation of Trade Unions, who was involved in that process, nevertheless initiated a campaign in mid August this year seeking the introduction of a maximum temperature in workplaces. However the TUC issued briefing in August 2006 for safety representatives about temperatures in the workplace which suggested safety representatives go to the HSE website for further information saying it provided "excellent advice".
10. The trial website provided the opportunity for interested parties mentioned above to comment on the content of the website and to offer suggestions. This new approach to consultation meant those interested in the subject were actively involved in the development of the website at a very early stage. They identified potential problems and issues needing further clarification, which could be addressed quickly.

Presentation

11. A press notice was released in June 2005 when the website was first launched. There is no significantly new information to warrant a further press notice on this occasion. Letters will be sent to those stakeholders who attended the seminar to inform them of the revised website. On 24 July 2006 Workplace Health Connect also issued a press release on working in hot weather to highlight some of the actions an employer can

introduce to mitigate the effects of the hot weather. Support offered by Workplace Health Connect on this has been included in responses to ministerial correspondence.

Costs and Benefits

12. There have been some set-up costs at policy, medical and technical level in developing the website. The website will help the vast majority of enquirers to manage thermal comfort better, particularly during extremes of weather when HSE receives a significant increase in the number of enquiries. It is too early to say how far the presence of the website will limit the increase in official correspondence on this topic in periods of extreme weather.

Financial/Resource Implications for HSE

13. There has been some staff cost in setting up and developing the website which comes to approximately £18,500. Further staff costs to complete the work on the thermal environment tool to measure and predict thermal comfort will be approximately £825. There will be small ongoing costs in maintaining the website day-to-day. In the longer term it should help reduce – though not eliminate – the need for HSE staff to deal with queries on thermal comfort, as well as providing readily accessible information to a wide audience.

Other Implications

14. N/A

Action / Next Steps

15. To note the development of the revised website. No other action necessary at present.