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Introduction

Good Morning. I am particularly pleased to have been asked to open the Access Industry Forum Conference. This forum, for me, illustrates the success of the Health and Safety at Work Act, the transition of HSE as a modern regulator, and the evolution of partnership working in health and safety.

A big thank you to the AIF for its contribution to partnership working with HSE. Long may it continue. We also fully recognise the part AIF and its constituent associations play in providing innovative access solutions and we hope they will continue to be a driving force in preventing work related falls.

Today, I'd like to touch on three areas within the context of this industry.

- Firstly, health and safety developments and performance over the last 30 years;
- Secondly, the benefits of partnership working and;
- Finally the proposed merger between HSC/E.

Developments and Performance

It is now over 30 years since the Health and Safety at Work Act created the Health and Safety Commission and Executive and gave local authorities a

wider enforcement role. These bodies were set up to implement a new regulatory framework for workplace health and safety in Great Britain.

This new framework couldn't have been further removed from the rigid, detailed and industry specific regulations of the time. Not only did the Act create a flexible system, which involved active consultation and engagement with the workforce, it also delivered a new regime underpinned by a proportionate, targeted and risk based approach.

The Act is as relevant now in 2007 as it was in 1974.

We can rightly claim to have been Britain's first risk-based regulator.

Looking at the health and safety statistics over the last 25 years we have clearly made positive improvements.

The number of workplace injuries has fallen substantially. For example - fatal injuries have gone down from nearly 500 in 1981 to 212 in 2005/06. Similarly there has been a significant reduction in fatal injuries arising from a fall from height - down from 126 in 1988/89 to 46 in 2005/06.

Whilst this is the lowest number of falls related fatalities on record, falls do remain the most common kind of fatal injury, which is why conferences like this one to promote discussion and share good practice remain so important. Moreover we cannot take the improvements made so far for granted.

Throughout the 1990's HSE found that, despite its best endeavours, there had been no notable reduction in the proportion of people being injured at work. This realisation led the Commission and the Executive to take a long hard look at what was happening and to question the effectiveness of its existing working practices and interventions.

In a conscious effort to inject new life into managing health and safety and deliver further reductions in the number of those being killed, injured or made

ill by work, the Commission and the Government agreed a new joint strategy: 'Revitalising Health and Safety'.

Launched in 2000 after extensive consultation with stakeholders, the Revitalising strategy set out how the Government and the Commission were going to work together to deliver significant reductions in incidences within the next 10 years. To do this the Commission began to focus its resources specifically on those work activities which were most likely to cause ill health, death or major injury.

Resources are and will always be limited, so we have to prioritise.

Given that falls from height were the biggest cause of fatal injuries, there was no doubt that this was a priority area for the Commission and the Executive. But this was about more than just a safety gain.

When a person suffers an injury at work, it can affect their social life, their family, friends and their finances. A fall can also result in permanent disability which puts additional pressures on the NHS, the welfare system and all of us as taxpayers.

Similarly the employer of the injured worker is likely to face an increase in their insurance premiums and the possibility of prosecution, not to mention a loss in productivity. With the insurance payout for a fall from height costing £19,000 or so – double the cost of many other work injuries - it remains a mystery why any employer would not want to minimise the risk of a fall.

By good fortune, while the Commission was developing its Revitalising Strategy, Europe was also beginning to address the issue of falls. The Temporary Work at Height Directive that followed meant we were able to deliver the Work at Height Regulations as a framework for future action on falls.

But regulations only provide the framework; it's convincing people to act that's the difficult bit! It was clear from the start that the Commission couldn't act alone if we were to deliver a reduction in the number of falls injuries. We recognised that further developing partnership working with stakeholders would be crucial to success.

Partnership Working

The access equipment industry has a strong tradition of collaborative working to improve safety and the Executive was keen to work with the leading associations for maximum impact. And so the creation of the Access Industry Forum, bringing together all the major interests in manufacture, supply and use of access equipment in the UK was a major opportunity to establish a sound partnership providing innovative solutions to working at height safely.

The Forum, with the support of HSE has established this annual conference as the premier work at height forum for safety practitioners and I congratulate you on that achievement and wish you well for the future.

The Forum and its associations have also been active supporters of HSE's programme of work to reduce the number of falls injuries. It has been energetic in developing and maintaining the electronic "Solutions" database, which you will hear more about later this morning. The AIF and its associations have supported the Executive's campaigning activities such as last year's "Height Aware" – and this is where I wish to plug "Ladders Week 2007".

Ladders Exchange 2007

The third strand in our three year campaign on falls is aimed at taking 'dodgy' ladders out of the workplace. We know from our inspectors that many of the ladders being used in the workplace are not up to scratch.

Our aim is to take 4000 of these dodgy ladders out of the workplace – roughly 10 per local authority - by working with partners in a ladders exchange scheme.

Ladders Exchange 2007 is aimed at those who manage/or control work. There will be a series of local initiatives across the country that will take place throughout June and July. HSE and our partners in local authorities, ladder manufacturers and hire companies are planning a series of events in the summer aimed at users of ladders in building and plant maintenance trades. We aim to promote sensible risk management for those users and further details will be found on the falls pages of HSE's website.

Back to today...later on this morning you'll have an opportunity to see and discuss a range of practical scenarios provided by each of the associations giving good practice advice on a range of common place work at height situations. Ian Greenwood, the Falls from Height Programme Manager, will also play a role in this.

Partnerships will remain an important area for HSE in the future. We recognise the value of bringing together expertise to solve the safety issues that we all face. There is no shortage of people who are willing to help which demonstrates the importance many organisations place on the health and safety of their, or their members', workforce.

Sensible Risk Management

(Slide 7 – Sensible Risk Management Principles)

Contrary to popular belief we do not think that preventing falls from height can be addressed by putting signs on mountains or banning ladders.

Improvements lie in sensible risk management, a principle which underpins

the framework of the Work at Height Regulations and all other health and safety legislation.

We believe that sensible risk management is about the practical steps employers should be taking to protect the health and safety of their workers. It's not about idle stories like banning conkers in the playground, which are all too often promoted by the media.

2006 saw HSE dispelling the health and safety rumours preventing people enjoying themselves, but at the same time we sought to address the complacency which often leads to an accident. HSE, in collaboration with a broad range of organisations, developed and launched a set of sensible risk principles to clarify what sensible risk management is and isn't about. As part of this we have also launched a revised version of the Risk Assessment guidance to make this clearer.

Additionally we have recently added a new Myth of the month page, to the HSE website – it consists of a cartoon drawing with a few key “do’s” and “don’ts” alongside. The intention of this initiative is to bury some of the long running rumours which have plagued HSE and been a constant source of confusion to everyone trying to follow safe working practices.

And so I hope representatives of the Ladder Association here today will be pleased that our first myth buster was aimed at tackling the myths around the banning of stepladders. Do take a look at it and please encourage your colleagues, friends and neighbours to do so too.

Sensible risk management saves lives; by promoting it we can save a lot more and prevent unnecessary pain and suffering.

Besides contributing to the reductions achieved in injuries and fatalities in the workplace, the Commission and the Executive also pride themselves in being adaptable. We are continually looking at ways of improving our effectiveness in response to societal change and reviewing and developing our role as a

modern regulator so as to ensure that our efforts continue to have the best possible effect.

Despite the occasional criticism from certain members of the media, surveys of both employers and members of the public indicate that HSE is a well regarded and trusted regulator.

However we must not become complacent. We must ensure that we remain effective, efficient and a strong voice for health and safety in the future. We will continue to do this best by taking time to listen to those beyond the Commission and the Executive; and by thinking about what we do, how we do it, and ultimately where we can make a positive difference to the health and safety of workers.

HSC/E Merger

With this in mind, the Commission recently consulted on a proposal to merge the Commission and Executive into a single body. We believe it will take us in the right direction for the future.

It is clear that the merger - while retaining the independence of the organisation as the regulator at arms length from ministers - will give us a more robust governance framework, improve our working practices and create a stronger voice for health and safety in Great Britain.

But it will *not* prompt a significant change of direction. Our focus will remain on promoting good sensible advice and taking action where necessary to address unacceptable performance.

You are unlikely to notice a great deal of change in your day to day contact, as the Commission and Executive already work very closely together. And the work that we do in partnership with organisations such as yours will continue to be important to us.

The public consultation showed that 80% of those responding agreed with the merger in principle.

At their meeting on the 15 May 2007, the Commission formally reviewed the results of consultation and agreed to proceed. If there is agreement by the Lord McKenzie, then there will be a ministerial consultation on the detailed changes to the HSW Act, which we hope will take place over the summer.

Conclusion

In conclusion I think it's fair to say we have come a long way in improving conditions in the workplace. Today it's widely accepted that workers should be able to do their job safely and go home at the end of the day to enjoy their social life.

And so my final message is this. There is still much to do by way of educating and promoting sensible risk management to those working at height. But this work isn't beyond us. I hope that we can look to AIF and its members for their continued support and innovation in developing practical solutions to prevent workers being injured whilst working at height. It can be done if we all continue to pull in the same direction.