

Sir Bill Callaghan, HSC Chair

Launch of the Fatality Statistics on

26 July 2007

Thank you John. 241 worker deaths. Unacceptable; and a disappointing increase following last year's record-low. Behind every one of the 241 people killed at work was a family, as well as loved ones and friends.

The context is that the overall fatality rate of 0.8 per 100,000 workers is still among the lowest in Europe, bettered only by Sweden and Denmark. On the other hand the trend annual reduction in fatal injuries has slowed. So we all have to redouble our effort. These statistics are only one part of the story, of course, and the figures for injuries and ill health will be published in November. But there is no doubt that it will now be more difficult to achieve our safety target.

We are today publishing the annual fatality figures but you will know that unvalidated figures for construction and agriculture are published quarterly. So these statistics, while disappointing, are not unexpected to us. Our own internal monitoring systems had alerted us to the rising numbers of construction deaths at the turn of the year and HSE and its stakeholders have already started to tackle this head on – we are on the case. Our intention is to put unvalidated data on both injuries and fatalities across the economy into the public domain on a quarterly basis.

Construction is important. But other industries also present us with significant challenges. For example, the number of worker fatalities across the waste and recycling industry has risen. Neither should we forget that 4 members of the public were killed last year as a result of refuse collection, including an 11 year old child.

Another challenge we are facing is to make sure we can protect vulnerable workers, particularly migrant workers. Some industry sectors - for example construction, agriculture, and services – have a high proportion of migrant workers, and we are determined to ensure we protect their health and safety at work, just as much as any other group.

Evidence available to us from the formal economy does not suggest that migrant workers are at greater risk than other workers. But the sheer size of the migrant workforce is now having an impact on our labour market. Moreover we must not forget that 21 Chinese cockle pickers died in Morecambe Bay only 3 years ago.

We will be continuing to monitor the situation, and assemble what evidence we have to determine if these vulnerable workers are indeed more at risk than other groups. Once we know, and have a more robust evidence base, we will be able to take action according to need. HSE has already taken action to make sure that employers know their duties and that information is available to migrant workers.

17 more people were killed in construction last year, a particularly worrying increase. John Spanswick, one of our Commissioners and a key figure in the industry, will speak to you in a moment.

When we first saw signs of an upturn in the numbers of deaths in construction, we examined how we targeted our interventions. As a result, we are refocusing our efforts on some of the harder to reach parts of the industry, where we are most concerned about workers' health and safety and the numbers of injuries. We are continuing to target specific parts of the industry,

notably new building and refurbishment, where we know we have to make inroads. With wider, and I must say welcome plans to build millions of new homes across the country, this will be a continuing challenge that we will face. I welcome the initiative of our Secretary of State calling together clients, contractors, trade unions, designers, suppliers and others for a special forum in September to try and crack the problems in the housing and refurbishment sectors.

Unfortunately Danny Carrigan, a trade union Commissioner and our lead on the construction industry cannot be with us today but he his main message is the need for partnership. Partnership between the industry and HSE and partnerships between employers and employees and their trade union representatives. As duty holders, the industry realises the role it must play to ensure the health and safety of its workers. We have seen some very good and encouraging partnership working, which we will all need to continue if we are going to achieve what we want.

Independent academic research suggests that when industries grow fast, safety performance suffers. The construction industry is certainly under pressure. That may explain the rise in construction fatalities. It does not justify it. It does not excuse it.

I have to remind you that safety is ultimately the responsibility of those who manage and direct companies and those who work for them.

Today's statistics are disappointing and distressing but improvements can still be made. They must be made. HSC/E is taking action. The ball now lies firmly in industry's court.