

An HSE statement on providing accessible advice and support

September 2004

SECTION 1: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Some businesses, particularly small businesses ...

"...say they want to comply with health and safety standards but are fearful of approaching HSE or local authorities for advice."

"...perceive HSE as an organisation of experts, talking to experts in big organisations and devising approaches and guidance for the same experts."

[A Strategy for workplace health and safety in Great Britain to 2010 and beyond]

Introduction

1. A key theme in the Health and Safety Commission's strategy is helping people to benefit from effective health and safety management and a sensible health and safety culture. Providing or promoting channels of accessible advice and guidance will play an important part in realising that ambition.
2. The detailed research and consultation, which informed the strategy, showed that awareness and understanding are important prerequisites to good health and safety performance. HSE and local authorities (LAs) already provide information, advice and guidance, which are respected as authoritative and comprehensive. Some businesses however, particularly small businesses, want to comply with health and safety standards but won't approach HSE or LAs for help because they fear that they may be alerting us to their problems and inviting enforcement action.
3. The modern industrial landscape consists of more small businesses than ever before – with over 90% of the 3.5 million or so businesses in the UK employing less than 10 people. If they fear contact with HSE or LAs and existing channels do not reach or influence them, we are missing a huge opportunity and potential for health and safety gain. It is essential therefore, that we extend our reach, improve the take-up of the advice and guidance we offer, and stimulate others to give better coverage.
4. This is not about reordering the balance of advisory and enforcement roles, it's about making them more effective. We want to improve the targeting of both to improve the effectiveness of the advisory role and to allow us to continue to be tough on those who wilfully disregard the law. We want the information and guidance we provide to businesses to be as helpful and as specific as possible, and for business to be clear about what it needs to do to comply with the law.
5. This statement fulfils the commitment in the Commission's strategy to produce proposals for accessible channels of advice and support free from the perceived fear of enforcement. It explains:

- the option of organisational separation of the enforcement and advisory functions and our intention to consider it in greater detail;
- how HSE is developing and improving its existing services, particularly where there is a perceived fear of enforcement at the point of delivery;
- how we will share what we learn with LAs so that they too can continue to develop their respected role as givers of advice and guidance;
- how we will work with others to develop and improve other channels of advice and guidance.

Use of terms

6. The terms information, advice, guidance and support can mean different things to different people. We recognise this. So that our approach is clear, our interpretation is set out below.

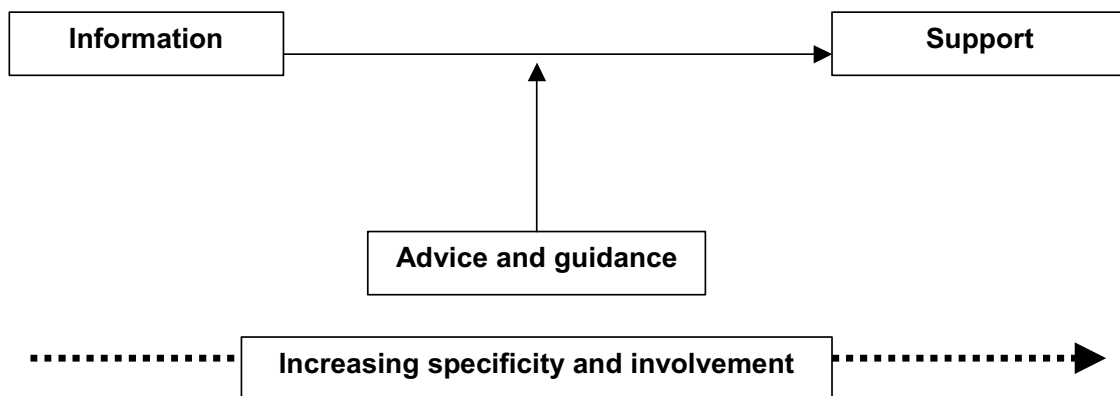


Figure 1 - describing information, advice and support

7. Moving from information to support, the relationship becomes increasingly more interactive, and the discussions between provider and customer more specific. Involvement and stake in the 'decision making process' also increase along this scale, as well as the level of expertise required by the provider.

Information

8. This is a passive, one-way transfer – the most simple and least involved method of communication. It can be pitched at a wide audience and is generally written. Many of HSE's publications and leaflets and the large amount of information available on the Internet are examples. The challenge is to produce accessible, relevant, useable and understandable information

that is effectively marketed. It is for the user to determine how to interpret the information for their needs.

Support

9. At the other end of the scale, support is a fully interactive exchange, being iterative and usually one-to-one. An example of support would be providing tailored advice on the risk assessment process, or discussing specific health and safety improvements. Support helps to close knowledge and competency gaps and provides access to additional channels of more specialist support where necessary. Support is usually unique to the time, circumstance and premises involved. The challenge is to provide support that is authoritative, proportionate and cost effective without compromising HSE's or LAs' roles as enforcers, or duty holders' full ownership of their legal responsibilities.

Advice and guidance

10. Advice is more targeted than information, but not as hands-on as support. It is likely to be two-way, although only in broad terms. It is available from HSE, LAs and intermediaries. Advice steps beyond information to interpretation for which a degree of health and safety 'expertise' is required. The receiver still has to interpret this advice for their specific circumstances. The challenge is to make advice and guidance relevant and easily available for businesses, and free from the concern that to access it would alert HSE to problems - potentially leading to enforcement.
11. For the purposes of this document advice and guidance are used interchangeably.

SECTION 2: SEPARATING ADVICE, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FROM THE ROLE OF ENFORCEMENT

12. Some consultees have told us that they would like to see an advice service separated from the enforcement function - an approach used in the Netherlands and the United States. The Commission received a presentation in December 2002 from the Dutch enforcement agency explaining their approach. Their system was introduced in 1994 and requires every employer to have a contract with a certified occupational health service. A key benefit is said to be comprehensive and trusted good quality advice free from enforcement and any perceived conflict of roles. Equally, they acknowledge that their system has increased the administrative burden on the employer, an issue they are trying to address.
13. The literature review that helped inform the strategy's development indicated the roles of enforcement and advice are not mutually exclusive. The two functions work together to reinforce each other, and the combination is

necessary for consistency. Stakeholders tell us that, above all, they value our and LAs' advice because it is viewed as authoritative.

14. Complete separation would require extensive legal and organisational changes as current legislation restricts our ability to separate these functions easily. We would also foresee major cost implications for which no provision exists at the current time. In addition, at this moment in time, we do not have any hard evidence to suggest that the service would be improved as a result. A member of HSE staff is visiting the Netherlands in the autumn to find out at first hand how this approach works in practice. Once this visit has been assessed and their scheme more properly evaluated, we will consider the applicability of the Dutch model in greater detail to see if all or parts of it would be of value here.

SECTION 3: DEVELOPING AND IMPROVING EXISTING HSE SERVICES

Our approach to charging for information and advice

15. HSE currently publishes some 600 products free of charge and is committed to making more information available online. Increasingly, this will become our primary mechanism for communicating with the world. But some of our publications, particularly the legal series, regulations, guidance and Approved Codes of Practice are priced. Paying for this guidance is a common complaint of business, and the Works and Pensions Select Committee recommended in July 2004 that all key publications be made free of charge on the Internet.
16. Priced publications generate in excess of £5m income each year and a move to publishing all guidance free of charge online would have a detrimental impact on HSE's staffing levels, regulatory activity and ability to produce future guidance. HSE is currently carrying out a review of its pricing policy with a view to developing a transition plan, allowing more information to appear on the web without incurring any business detriment as a result. We will publish our findings by the end of 2004.

Internet services

17. We recognise the Internet as an increasingly important portal of communication for businesses, and it is key to our plans to deliver quality information and advice in parallel with our enforcement role. We are committed to making the right information easier to find. Development has already started on clearer organisation of our website based around specific topics, industries and occupations, with an improved search facility.
18. Our development strategy is based on the differing needs of our stakeholders. We will be introducing targeted, specific online 'self-assessment' tools. These have already been piloted for the agriculture sector, and will be rolled out to

other priority sectors. Increased use of multimedia will also make our information more accessible, usable and relevant to certain groups.

19. We are developing advice forums in the form of 'online communities' – an opportunity for safety professionals, company representatives and all with an interest in the subject to network, share best practice, and provide advice and support. The stress forum and asbestos licencing forum, are examples of online communities already up and running on the HSE website (<http://webcommunities.hse.gov.uk>). We intend to introduce more communities aimed at specific industries, topics and occupations, and host online discussions of 'hot topics' with a subject expert on hand to provide relevant advice.
20. We will post all our free publications online, in one place, so that they are easy to find. Where a publication is not available for free, hsedirect (www.hsedirect.com) acts as an online library for the majority of our publications.

HSE Infoline

21. Infoline currently provides personal information on health and safety issues for both telephone callers and written enquiries. We want to extend the reach and scope of that service through better marketing and the provision of advice. In time, we would like Infoline to be the main portal of communication with HSE for those seeking advice and guidance beyond that available from our website. This will improve the convenience for customers and reduce the burden on our front-line staff.
22. We will evaluate the cost implications of any future developments of Infoline and the range of options through which this expansion might be funded. Stakeholders have told us they want the security of advice that is trusted, accurate and comprehensive, so it is essential we maintain Infoline as an integral part of the HSE brand. The service will, however, remain anonymous with no requirement that customers provide contact details, and we will make this explicitly clear to callers.
23. We currently promote Infoline services on the HSE website and welcome email queries. The service also provides the top 'Frequently Asked Questions' and the 'Top Topics' dealt with. This service will become the 'hub' of customer activity and enable the development of better customer relationships by providing comprehensive support for the 'online' community. We are also investigating the cost of providing a 'real-time' interactive web based service through which the customer can connect with Infoline for feedback. In addition, we intend to offer a bulletin facility. Subscribers will be sent email topic bulletins of interest to them. This service will also be anonymous.

24. By the end of September 2004, the 'Gas safety' helpline will be transferred to Infoline. This will ensure that quality and consistency are sustained whilst maintaining the high standard we currently hold in government as a benchmark for the public sector.

SECTION 4: WORKING WITH OTHERS TO IMPROVE THE CHANNELS OF ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Local authorities

25. Local authorities are our partners in delivering the strategy. HSE recognises their contribution to the provision of a wealth of quality information, advice and guidance. As part of our approach to improving the partnership we will promote information and experience sharing to improve national coverage at the local level. We will also find ways to work together more closely in the development of effective channels of communication.

Intermediaries

26. We want to stimulate the provision of advice, guidance and support by working with and through intermediaries and to complement the channels directly supported by HSE. Evidence suggests that working in this way is valuable. However, the representation of intermediaries varies in different sectors, the merits of different partners have not been fully evaluated and the resource implications of working with intermediaries in this way are uncertain. We will research the potential role of small firms intermediaries and tailor our response accordingly.

Occupational health and safety support systems

27. HSE has begun a project to establish up to five pilots to test a model for the delivery of occupational health and safety support and advice on return to work issues through innovative partnerships. The model will explore innovative routes for accessing advice through, for example, websites and third-party problem solvers, and for signposting to more specialist services.
28. *Safe and Healthy Working*, a national support scheme for small businesses in Scotland is already using this approach. It provides a telephone advice line, website and professional advisers who make workplace visits. HSE is a member of the Safe and Healthy Working National Advisory Group and is contributing to the evaluation of the scheme.
29. *Constructing better health*, a pilot for the construction industry, will roll out later this year in Leicestershire. The pilot will provide best practice management advice to reduce exposure to key health risks, and provide free assistance with risk assessments and health screening for employees.

30. A third pilot is based in Kirklees. The metropolitan council, three local primary care trusts and Job Centre Plus are providing a local occupational health, safety and rehabilitation support service. Some elements of the service will be available this autumn, with the full service rolling out in January 2005.

Worker safety advisor scheme

31. HSE funded a 'Worker Safety Advisor' (WSA) initiative, to provide safety advisors for small businesses. The scheme resulted in real improvements to the workplaces involved, and work is currently underway to extend it, with funding from the DWP 'Challenge Fund'. We have recently selected 12 partnerships to provide more safety advisors.

DTI Business link

32. The Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) has launched a web resource called Business Link, which provides online essential information, including health and safety, aimed at business start-up.

SECTION 5: MEASURING IMPROVEMENTS

33. We want to measure the success of these proposals and to keep them under review. To establish a baseline, work is underway to understand more fully the rationale for use of existing channels, their usage levels, the types of enquiry, ease of access and the service costs.