

Engage and deliver: effective leadership on health and safety strategy in local government

Report and overview – Workshop held in Solihull on 10 March 2010

In June 2009 the Health and Safety Executive launched the new health and safety strategy for Great Britain – a strategy inviting everyone to ‘Be part of the solution’. At the launch Sir Steve Bullock, Chair of the Local Government Association’s HR Panel, signed a pledge on behalf of the LGA group to contribute to the delivery of strategy goals including this leadership workshop. The workshop involved a focus group of elected members, senior managers and health and safety managers. It centred on the important role of local government in demonstrating competence and leadership in health and safety, both as employers and commissioners of services.

The aim of the workshop, supported by HSE, LGE, WLGA and CoSLA, was to identify risk management priorities for local government and explore steps to ensure local government demonstrates leadership in respect of strategy delivery.

Most representatives were from England and Wales. CoSLA representatives attended and are involved in ongoing discussions. It is likely that a similar workshop will be held in Scotland to consider issues relating to Scottish local authorities.

Presentations

Judith Hackitt, HSE Chair

Judith stressed the importance of local authorities (LAs) delivering their part of the health and safety strategy for Great Britain as:

- dutyholders;
- co-regulators; and
- major procurers of services – through which LAs can set standards and expectations of outsourced service providers.

She focused on the need for a common-sense approach to risk in the public sector stating: ‘It is the job of leaders to separate real risks from trivia’. She went on to say that effective leadership sets the tone for a positive health and safety culture.

‘Competence is not just knowledge, but the ability to apply that knowledge sensibly and proportionately – without being buried in paperwork’

Judith Hackitt, HSE Chair

Judith believes health and safety is a shared responsibility and hoped the workshop provided a starting point for LA senior managers and HSE to work closer to deliver the strategy. She ended by emphasising the need for a proportionate approach to risk management to regain the value of true health and safety, particularly on public safety issues.

Steve Sumner, LGE National Health and Safety Policy Adviser

Steve provided an update on workforce and service delivery issues affecting local government risk management including the effects of an ageing and predominantly female workforce, the moves to unitary status and the current economic climate.

'It's never a good time for local government – but these could be the worst times we can imagine'

Steve Sumner, LGE National Health and Safety Policy Adviser

Improvements are evident and Steve reported a decrease in sickness absence across local government. However, it is estimated that work-related stress, back pain and musculoskeletal disorders could be a factor in almost 40% of sickness absence, which reflects the importance of tackling ill health – 'Safety is an issue but health is the greatest challenge'.

He referred to Dame Carol Black's review and the onus on local government to be an exemplar for the wider economy. He was also clear further work is needed to develop positive, visible leadership on health, safety and well-being within councils.

Ruth Sleigh, HSE

Ruth presented preliminary results from a project to analyse LA RIDDOR reports to help understand the risk profile across local government. The data provided no overall surprises with the main causes of injury to LA workers including:

- slips and trips;
- manual handling; and
- being hit by vehicles and moving objects.

Less obviously, falls from height are a significant cause of major injuries in education and social care, and public injuries remain a cause for concern. Finally, Ruth noted that despite some improvements, overall injury reduction trends have plateaued. She reinforced Judith's comments that the new strategy provides an opportunity to kick-start new approaches to effective leadership and competence for a positive sustained effect across local government.

Councillor Ceri Jones, Gloucestershire County Council

Cllr Jones drew attention to the low priority many councillors assign health and safety, mainly because of competing priorities – which he referred to as 'the curse of the volunteer'. Many councillors are negatively influenced by media coverage of health and safety.

He referred to a misplaced assumption among councillors that others will deal with the issues. He is acutely aware of the duty of care he owes the workforce and the community and he is grateful for publications such as the IOSH booklet, *Think about health and safety*. He would welcome more detail – perhaps some specific tools to support elected members in understanding their role in health and safety governance.

'Councillors shouldn't micromanage – but should satisfy themselves that risks are being sensibly managed'

Cllr Ceri Jones, Gloucestershire County Council

Owen Williams, Chief Executive, Calderdale Council

Owen Williams referred to his experience of health and safety by giving examples of some issues he has addressed as a senior local government officer. He tries to concentrate on providing leadership within his authority, while keeping in touch with his professional advisers through regular meetings.

He stressed the difference between management and leadership – the former being about goals and systems, while leadership is based around beliefs, attitudes, principles and behaviours. He shared his ‘big three’ elements for successful engagement: ‘leadership, culture and processes’.

Owen holds a firm belief that leadership does not just come from the top but is an essential component at every level within the organisation. He believes one of the key emerging agendas for local government is reduced resources and increased use of partnerships. He foresees a significant loss of corporate memory in respect of health and safety as experienced, knowledgeable people leave LAs.

‘We should never get tired of repeating health and safety messages’

Owen Williams, Chief Executive Calderdale Council

Outcomes

Delegates were asked to propose risk management priorities for local government and discuss them with others they did not normally work with. The priorities identified broadly similar themes. These are reflected below:

Local government priorities – common themes identified (not in order of priority)

- Health and safety in procurement
- Managing health and safety in partnership
- Culture – setting the tone for risk management. What are the expectations from senior managers?
- Leadership – recognising good risk management leadership
- Competence – confidence, wisdom, tools and standards
- Engaging strategic decision makers
- Change management – consequences for health, opportunities for new ways of working new partnerships
- Sharing good practice – making better use of existing meetings and IT
- Devolved responsibilities – competence and monitoring performance
- Asset management – opportunity to group key related safety issues

‘The chief exec is the key – if they aren’t engaged there will be no buy-in or action from other directors’

Peter Murdock, Chief Executive Gedling Borough Council

Delegates were also given the opportunity to air their views on the complex issues of engaging, leading and delivering on the priorities. Suggestions and comments included:

- HSE to provide clear leadership messages to senior managers.
- A framework on what good health and safety and leadership behaviours look like.
- Innovative ways of presenting information are needed. Branding is important.
- There was a suggestion that a professional management body like the Institute of Directors has real influence on many chief executives.
- Senior managers and elected members should be accountable for health and safety performance through annual reporting.
- Engagement and ownership at regional level and in individual councils is important.
- The role of existing regional practitioner groups was recognised.

'We need to engage with chief executives locally on the real issues – at the moment 'bad news' incidents are what catch their attention'

Cllr Apu Bagchi, Elected Member Bedford Borough Council & Deputy Chair LGA HR Panel

'Elected members need to be incorporated as part of the team'

Cllr Ceri Jones, Gloucestershire CC

Post-event news

Post-event review

HSE, WLGA and LGE have reviewed the event to consider how leadership and competence on health and safety are enhanced and developed across local government. HSE is committed to supporting local government to develop its response to the strategy. The goal is to develop a framework for wider consultation, supporting local and national approaches to managing risks, securing consensus on key priorities and engaging more senior managers in leading effectively on health and safety.

Potential for strategic direction and governance

The Local Government Panel – established in 2006 to provide elected members with direct links to the HSE Board on the regulatory role for LAs – could widen its remit to include wider dutyholder health and safety issues. It meets in July 2010. LGE and WLGA are considering options for engaging and seeking strategic support and direction via the LGA HR Panel.

Framework for engagement and delivery – the role of health and safety professionals

The LGE's National Health and Safety Practitioner Panel, which includes representation from the WLGA, has agreed to convene a working group to develop plans and a framework for wider consultation in England and Wales.

Engaging with LA senior managers

HSE will investigate the potential for presenting clearer messages to senior managers. Proposals raised suggested using podcasts by Judith Hackitt and other senior figures, including chief executives and professional management bodies, to broadcast leadership messages to senior managers across local government.

Worker involvement

Proposals to achieve effective leadership and engagement across local government will also need to promote the involvement and contribution of the workforce and trade unions.

Your feedback

Please share your ideas for taking the strategy forward. Contact Ruth Sleigh at ruth.sleigh@hse.gsi.gov.uk if you have examples of good leadership practice and effective worker involvement you believe should be shared with others across local government.

'... there is no "one size fits all" approach to this ...'

Paul Lankester, Chief Executive Stratford District Council