

Sandy Blair's presentation to Swansea Safety Group 2007 Annual Seminar

20 June 2007

SLIDE 1

Introduction

Many thanks Robin for your warm introduction and to Ann and the Swansea Safety Group for the opportunity to come and meet with you today. The Health and Safety Commission attaches great importance to opportunities as this to engage with health and safety practitioners – not only to have a dialogue with you concerning major health and safety issues but equally importantly to have the opportunity to see what you are doing on the ground to ensure that risks to health and safety are being properly controlled.

I took up my appointment as a member of the Health and Safety Commission just over a year ago. The sheer breadth of health and safety issues coming before the Commission during that time – whether policy, strategy and resources – has been mind boggling. I bring to the job the knowledge and experience gained from my years in local government, including as Chief Executive of Newport Borough Council and Chief Executive of the Welsh Local Government Association, but also a desire to play my part in helping to ensure that we have a health and safety record that leads the world.

I look forward to the day and in particular having the chance to talk with you about your work and achievements.

SLIDE 2

There are a number of key issues that I would like to cover in my presentation:

- First, as background I would like to say a few words about the changes in industrial structure and economic activity in Wales in recent years and the impact this has had on the environment within which you work;
- I then will briefly review the progress that we have made in reducing the incidence of ill health, injury at days lost in the workplace;
- I plan to talk about the major challenges we face in the sphere of occupational health in particular;
- I also plan to address the importance of the 'Sensible risk' principles and the key messages that we must get over to ensure that health and safety is not seen as trivial nor a bureaucratic burden.

Changing economic and employment landscape

Economists and many others have observed a dramatic shift in employment patterns in Wales over the past twenty years with a shift away from jobs in traditional industries as manufacturing, mining and agriculture towards the service sector. A higher proportion of people in Wales work in public administration, education and health. Major changes in business ownership have also taken place.

SLIDE 3

Wales is a dynamic and vital part of the economy (based on 2004 data) :

- With a workforce in employment of just over 1.3 million
- 390,000 (30%) are employed in public administration, education and health
- Almost 300,000 workers (23%) are employed in the service industries
- 179,000 (14%) are employed in manufacturing
- 157,000 (12%) are employed in the finance sector
- Nearly 100,000 (7%) are employed in the construction industry

How relevant are these changing economic circumstances to the challenges we face in ensuring healthy and safe workers and workplaces ? Extremely relevant I would argue in the sense of shaping how organisations view the management of risk and in influencing their culture in managing health and safety.

It is wrong to think that the compositional changes in the structure of the economy and industry make our task of creating a society with healthy and safe workplaces is an easier one. Have no doubt that although the risks associated with health and safety may have changed as industries and employment have changed we continue to face major challenges.

Nor should we forget that we live with the legacy of the past. There are thousands of workers, including many in Wales, who worked in those old industries, or who were exposed to materials as coal dust and asbestos in their workplaces, and who are still paying the price. Many do not live to enjoy retirement – these workers made ill or killed through exposure to dangerous materials are very much of our present and our future. Let them be a constant reminder of the importance of ensuring risks to health and safety are properly controlled.

A progress report

It is shocking to recall that around 1,000 employees died each year at the end of the 1960s. And that the number of fatal and non-fatal accidents in factories, docks and warehouses and construction was over 300,000 in 1970 compared with 193,000 in 1961.

SLIDE 4

In contrast, progress since the 1970s has been marked: 160 employees and 52 self-employers were killed at work in 2005/06, the lowest number and the lowest rate on record. Although compositional changes in the workforce can explain some of the improvement, the regulatory regime, proposed by the

Commission and enforced by the Executive and local authorities, has been a major contributor.

A cautious estimate is that over 5,000 lives have been saved by the health and safety improvements introduced following the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 Act. Construction remains a hazardous industry but the number of deaths at work in that sector is a third of the late 1960s level despite the industry employing many more people.

So how far have we come since 2000 and what do the 2005/6 health and safety statistics show about our progress towards Revitalising Health and Safety targets?

The most recent two years show good news :

- Fatalities have fallen from 223 in 2004/5 to 212 in 2005/6
- in 2005/6 there were 13 fatal injuries to workers in Wales – down from 15 in 2004/5
- The number of fatalities has fallen progressively since 2000/2001 when there were 292 of which 17 were in Wales

SLIDE 5

- As this slide shows Major injuries have also fallen - in 2005/6 major injuries for all workers stood at 29,856 down from 31,702 the previous year;
- There were 1,647 major injuries in Wales in 2005/6 down from almost 1,750 in 2004/5
- However the poor performance in 2003/4 means that we are not yet on track to meet the target for reducing the rate of fatal and major injuries by 10% by 2010.

SLIDE 6

But as this slide shows there is much better news when we look at ill health and days lost :

- A quarter fewer days were lost in Great Britain because of health and safety failures comparing 2005/6 with the start of this decade: from 39.8 million in 2000/2 down to 30.5 million days in 2005/6 – 24 million days absence were caused by stress and msd;
- It is estimated that 2.2 million days were lost in Wales due to workplace injury and work-related ill-health in 2004/5- an estimated 2.0 days per worker.

Safety Groups as Swansea's and their members have played a leading role in the improvements we have achieved to date – I do hope that you will continue to play a key role to play in the future including through the provision of competent advice, training and guidance.

SLIDE 7

Failure to prevent ill health, especially that arising from work activities, is expensive. As I'm sure you appreciate there are other costs to be factored in, including the costs to the individual and society, if we do not achieve our goal of healthy and safe workplaces and employee well-being.

In our economy 1 million people a week take sick leave and whilst the majority return to work quickly in an average week 3,000 people are off sick for more than six months and of those 80% will not work again for the next five years. That has had a major human and economic cost. Some 600,000 new people are flowing on to Incapacity Benefit each year.

SLIDE 8

Here are the hard facts concerning sickness absence in the UK :

- An estimated 164 million working days are lost each year due to all causes of sickness absence – an average of 7 to 8 days per employee;
- Only 1-in20 absences are long term but these account for at least one-third of working time lost.

SLIDE 9

Common health problems such as stress and back pain that are largely responsible for work-related ill-health. This is one of the major challenges at the heart of the Government's Health, Work and Well-Being Strategy, launched in Autumn 2005 . The key themes of the Strategy are :

- To improve the health and well-being of the working age population striking the right balance between prevention, treatment and rehabilitation;
- To influence people to change cultures and behaviours – this will need time and commitment;
- To win the support of key stakeholders including employer groups, trade unions and professional bodies – this is essential;
- Our vision is to gain recognition of work as important and beneficial and to remove institutional barriers to starting, returning or remaining in work.

We know that good work is good for our health and well-being and that being in work can help people recover from both physical and mental health problems. Keeping people healthy and in employment is crucial if we are to achieve motivated, healthy workforces and more stable, economically viable communities.

I hope you will agree that the effort and resources devoted by HSC/E over the last two years to the Backs campaigns, including for example the practical workshops and awareness raising events run by HSE colleagues in Wales, have played an important part in promoting the good jobs agenda and will continue to do so.

SLIDE 10

HSE is producing joint plan with the Welsh Assembly to implement the Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the Welsh workforce, in particular:

- Promoting Welsh Backs and HSE Better Backs, aimed at reducing incidence and sickness absence. Already improvements in attitude and behaviour have been seen. Public awareness of need to stay active and self manage back pain has increased by 25%. Events so far have attracted over 500 delegates;
- We are also jointly developing Corporate Health Standard scheme for SMEs. The scheme is a performance accredited award scheme. Already successful with larger public and private organisations this is being adapted for the smaller organisations;
- In October we are planning a “Joint Health is Good Business” Conference with the Mid Wales Manufacturing Group.

Can I say few words more about Workplace Health Connect (WHC) in Wales – pleased to note that the whole of Wales is covered by the WHC pathfinder. And recognise the important role being played Holistic Services Ltd, the manager and deliverer of Workplace Health Connect in Wales. The Health and Safety Commission will be watching with considerable interest to see the benefits and improvements WHC brings to the health and well-being of workers in Wales and more widely.

Sensible risk

SLIDE 11

According to some stories, health and safety is an albatross around the neck of Britain, concentrating on trivial risks and petty bureaucracy to the detriment of citizens. It bans simple everything from doormats to Christmas decorations, whilst making trapeze artists wear hard hats and children enjoying a game of conkers wear goggles.

You and I know see a rather different side of health and safety, the one that has saved the lives of more than 5,000 workers since the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act was passed and that every day protects people from ill health and injury. It concerns me greatly that the image of health and safety as petty bureaucracy will damage our ability to make a practical difference on the real risks.

So what is behind the stories? They seem to split into 3 basic categories.

Firstly there are the simple myths with no basis in fact at all. Whether it's trapeze artists being made to wear hard hats or the banning of firemen's poles from fire stations, they are utter rubbish. HSE is now running a 'myth of the month' cartoon feature on its web site to tackle some of the most popular myths – well worth a look.

Secondly there are stories that contain a grain of truth – someone, somewhere really has gone beyond what the law and common sense dictate. Perhaps the most infamous is the head teacher who made children wear goggles to play conkers – a crazy decision, but one that has apparently now been copied elsewhere.

And thirdly there are the times where health and safety is used as a false excuse to justify a decision made for other – usually financial reasons. The closure of leisure facilities is a classic example.

The great majority of popular stories misrepresent what the law – either criminal or civil actually expects. However, behind many is a grain of truth – someone, somewhere really has made the decision described and usually with the best of intentions. It is clear that we need to tackle both the myths and the realities.

You are hopefully already aware that we have based our response around a set of principles of sensible risk management that set out what we believe sensible risk management is – and perhaps most importantly is not – about. We have had incredibly broad support for the principles from all sorts of stakeholders and I'm pleased to say that IOSH have been at the forefront of that support.

SLIDE 12

HSC 'Principles of Sensible Risk Management'

Sensible risk management is about:

- ✓ Ensuring that workers and the public are properly protected
- ✓ Providing overall benefit to society by balancing benefits and risks, with a focus on reducing real risks – both those which arise more often and those with serious consequences.
- ✓ Enabling innovation and learning, not stifling them.
- ✓ Ensuring that those who create risks manage them responsibly and understand that failure to manage real risks responsibly is likely to lead to robust action.
- ✓ Enabling individuals to understand that as well as the right to protection, they also have to exercise responsibility.

SLIDE 13 Sensible risk management is not about

- × Creating a totally risk free society
- × Generating useless paperwork mountains
- × Scaring people by exaggerating or publicising trivial risks
- × Stopping important recreational and learning activities for individuals where the risks are managed
- × Reducing protection of people from risks that cause real harm and suffering.

Now that we have launched the principles, what are the specific issues on which we need to concentrate our efforts? The analysis, research and consultation indicate two clear priorities: unnecessary paperwork and public safety.

There is a clear concern amongst business people at health and safety becoming a bureaucratic, rather than a practical exercise. I share that concern, not just because bureaucracy stifles the efficiency and flexibility of businesses, but also because of the simple fact that on it's own paperwork never saved a life. It is only ever a means to an end, not an end in itself. I am sure that you as IOSH members recognize that reality and I would urge you to demonstrate your professionalism through the quality of your work, not the quantity of paper involved.

The other area of concern is public safety. It is very telling that the vast majority of popular stories are not about the health and safety of workers at all. With the odd exception, there appears to be a reassuring understanding of the need to protect people at work. The concern seems to revolve around interventions that nanny people in their everyday lives, preventing them from enjoying activities they take for granted or imposing frustrating and unsightly restrictions upon them. In legal terms, it is the section 3 issues where we all need to be thinking carefully and creatively. That applies to the vast number of leisure facilities operated by councils, but also to the more mundane situations, such as people visiting factories, shops or offices.

The principles of sensible risk management can help inform our approach.

SLIDE 14

Sensible risk is not about: creating a totally risk free society; stopping important recreational and learning activities for individuals where the risks are managed.

In dealing with public risks, the focus needs to be firmly on finding ways to make activities safe enough – not stopping them happening. To use a sound bite: health and safety needs to be about saving lives, not stopping people living. Our mindset needs to be: how do I make this work?

Starting from that premise, the next question has to be: what controls are appropriate? Again the principles can provide some help.

SLIDE 15

Sensible risk management is about: providing overall benefit to society by balancing benefits and risks, with a focus on reducing real risks – both those which arise more often and those with serious consequences; enabling individual to understand that as well as the right to protection, they also have to exercise responsibility.

Conclusion

SLIDE 16

Can I mention some other local initiatives – some of which you may well be involved in :

- We are planning joint guidance for employers/agencies of migrant workers in Wales and events to bring the key stakeholders/networks together to help achieve joined up working, particularly in the manufacturing and service sectors;
- We have also agreed a plan with Welsh LAs on joint working with a goal of over 120 inspection initiatives this year targetting priority objectives;
- We continue our campaign, Moving goods safely, and will be working with the drinks industry to improve handling of products to pubs, restaurants and bars with a similar initiative for planned for furniture delivery;

- We also will be undertaking a flexible warranting project in North Wales working with Local Authorities to facilitate LA inspectors to target satellite dish installing activities.

SLIDE 17

In conclusion we need to be clear about our objectives – we continue to face considerable challenges. There is no room for complacency in our work to drive down the incidence of injury, ill-health and days lost in the workplace and maintain a position leading the world.

You have got a jam-packed day ahead of you. I wish you well in your endeavours.