

# Research summary

## BSR Culture Change Programme 2024-25 research

Insight and Service Design Team, Health and Safety Executive  
Research conducted by Verian

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# Commissioning

This report is a summary of the findings of desk and qualitative research conducted by Verian, an independent research agency, between July 2024 and March 2025. The research was commissioned by the Insight and Service Design team in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The contents of the report, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are the views of the agency alone and do not necessarily represent the views of HSE.

# Background and objectives

## Business context

The Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 set in motion review and inquiry processes that highlighted systemic failures and a broken and fragmented industry culture across what is referred to in this report as the *built environment*. Beyond the direct regulation of higher-risk buildings (HRBs) and the building control profession, reviews (such as that by Dame Judith Hackitt [ref]) placed a strong focus on culture change in industry to enable better adherence to building safety and quality standards.

Given the size and complexity of the built environment industries, culture change is a huge and complicated task. Notwithstanding, the Building Safety Regulator (BSR) has committed to addressing this and the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan stated that:

*“The Building Safety Regulator will increase our knowledge of the built environment and will use this to drive improvements in building safety and standards of all buildings. We will support those working in the built environment to take responsibility for driving a sustained and meaningful culture change, incentivising continuous improvement and, when necessary, addressing non-compliance.”*

In 2023-4 the HSE Insight and Service Design team worked with colleagues in BSR Operational Policy and Communications to commission exploratory primary research to progress this vision. As part of this, a high-level Culture Framework was developed that identified five key drivers of positive industry culture – see figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: The Culture Framework**



This report sets out the findings of further work conducted in 2024-5 that explored industry perspectives on culture and supports the development of a strategy for communicating about the Culture Framework.

## Research objectives

The overall objectives of the research were as follows:

- To conduct a synthesis and gap analysis of existing knowledge about the state of industry culture.
- To develop the Culture Framework and co-create and test a supplementary guide for industry on how to use the Framework in practice.
- To explore the feasibility of creating a short, flexible question set that can help future research projects to more consistently capture insight relating to the cultural maturity of a given industry.

## Topline summary

The built environment industry is widely viewed as fragmented, with siloed practices, inconsistent collaboration, and a lack of shared purpose or building safety culture. This fragmentation is felt to be exacerbated by unclear and uneven regulations, cost-driven procurement, limited insurance and liability cover, transient workforces, limited training, and client expectations for short project timeframes; all of which hinder accountability, quality control, and consistency in competency standards. In this context, experts said that it is critical that any strategy to drive improvement in industry culture must focus on establishing positive building and safety culture 'upstream' in the project process as this can have a disproportionately large effect on what happens 'downstream' in the construction and management phases of the building development cycle.

Overall, during the research, participants were positive about the concept of a "Guide for Change" and its potential to align industry; though in its current guise it was seen as too broad or complex for some groups (such as smaller contractors and domestic workers). The Guide was felt to be most relevant for those starting to think strategically about culture change, including those in management roles. Participants stressed the need for the Guide to clarify the shared culture change mission, explain the role of both BSR and industry, and tailor content to different industry roles to maximise engagement and impact.

# Research methodology

## Evidence review

A total of 19 documents were reviewed, which included a mix of internal research reports and published policy and industry reviews giving evidence on the state of industry culture. Insight from the documents was inputted into an Excel analysis framework organised primarily around the Culture Framework drivers of positive industry culture (Figure 1).

To supplement this, 13x 60-minute online in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants were drawn from both academia and industry to provide an independent perspective on industry as well as represent experiences on the ground. Interviews explored views on industry culture and perceptions of industry performance in relation to the drivers of positive industry culture as set out in the Culture Framework.

## Culture Framework development

To ensure any developments to the Culture Framework were tested with relevant audiences (and to support targeting of wider BSR activities going forward), workshops were conducted with BSR's and HSE's internal teams to understand in depth the main groups (and then sub-groups within this) that comprise the 'built environment industries'. Validation of this was conducted with other government departments including MHCLG and DBT/OPSS.

Further workshops were then conducted with internal stakeholders to co-create a 'Guide for Change' augmenting the work previously done on the Culture Framework (Figure 1). This guide aimed to introduce those working in the built environment to the culture change agenda, set out the Culture Framework, and provide further detail and inspiration for how to effect positive change in their situation. The format developed for testing was a 29-page slide pack that included an introduction to the idea of culture change that was then split into sections relating to the four different macro 'levels' of industry identified in the initial workshops:

- Government and regulators
- Professional and sector bodies
- Leaders and senior managers within organisations; and
- Individuals.

For each level of industry, it explained what a culture promoting safety and standards would look like in relation to each element of the Culture Framework and provided prompts for consideration and action.

24x 90-minute online group discussions were recruited representing these macro groups (comprising three to four participants in each group). This included:

- Three groups among participants working for government and regulatory bodies.
- Six groups among those working for professional and sector bodies.
- Eight groups among managers working for organisations operating within the built environment industry.
- Seven groups of individual workers.

Participants represented the following parts of industry: construction products and manufacturing; building work commissioning and procurement; building design; building control; construction, refurbishment, maintenance and improvement; and property management.

The 'Guide for Change' was used as stimulus during the group discussions for exploring participants' perspectives on industry culture, as well as perceptions of the concept, content and format of the guide. This was used to help elicit ideas for future communication about the culture change agenda.

## Question set development

A 90-minute exploratory workshop with internal stakeholders was used to develop a question set comprising 12 main questions. To keep the scope of the work manageable, these questions were based on just two of the key culture change drivers, so that any learning could be subsequently applied to the remaining drivers. 'Awareness' and 'Accountability & Leadership' were chosen, as these represent the first steps on the journey towards culture change for many, and so it was hypothesised were likely to be relevant to a broad range of those working in industry.

Eight 45-minute online cognitive testing interviews were then conducted. These explored the question set in terms of comprehension and perceptions of the extent to which the questions appropriately identified aspects of cultural maturity. Participants included those working in the following parts of industry: building commissioning and procurement; building design; building control; construction, refurbishment, maintenance and improvement; and property management.

## Structure of this report

This report synthesises findings from all parts of the research:

- 'Perspectives on culture in the built environment' brings together findings from the evidence review and Culture Framework development strands to avoid duplication and overlap.
- 'Industry performance on the drivers of culture change' draws mostly on findings from the experts interviewed within the evidence review, although many of the key insights were validated within the group discussions as part of the Culture Framework development.
- 'Responses to the Guide for Change' and 'Communicating culture change' refer to findings from the Culture Framework development strand.

- The final section is devoted to the findings relating to the question set.

When we refer to 'experts', this refers to feedback from interviewees from the evidence review; others who took part are referred to as 'participants'.

# Main findings

## Perspectives on culture in the built environment

There was consensus that built environment culture is siloed, fragmented and lacking overarching unity. Participants believed this was largely due to the fact that different parties work on different projects in different ways, and that relationships vary by project.

Experts also characterised industry as having no common purpose and no positively defined building safety culture. They described parties being inhibited from working together effectively, caused by a fear of liability and by responsibility being diffused across different parties.

Participants agreed that the fragmentation of industry has the effect of reducing accountability, collaboration and quality control across project stages within the building development cycle and undermining consistent competence standards. All of this hinders improvement to industry culture. With little sense of what unites industry, culture is hard to define and tends to be framed negatively, with reference to problems and issues rather than a positive focus on safety and standards.

Participants believed that systemic factors, including established business practices and norms, contribute to this situation and highlighted the following issues:

- The siloed supply chain, which involves numerous parties often working separately with insufficient collaboration or third-party oversight. This can be compounded by an employment model characterised by a high proportion of self-employed contractors working on projects in a transient manner, which prevents the development or improvement of consistent ways of working.
- Uneven and unclear regulation. Participants found this confusing, with some roles being more regulated than others within a regime focused on performance-based targets and an emphasis on individuals and organisations taking accountability. Participants also sometimes felt that there could be a lack of clear government guidance on how to comply with regulation. This means that even those with the best intentions can find it difficult to know whether their actions are meeting expectations.
- Labour shortages and lack of ongoing training, with not enough recruits entering industry, and insufficient training provided for those who do. This means that some workers lack competence, including those who are long-established.
- Limited insurance and liability cover, which can prevent individuals and organisations from being able to take responsibility when needed and may increase reluctance to report poor practice.

Participants regarded current commissioning and procurement practices as critical for setting the tone for projects. They highlighted aspects of these that often undermine a positive culture in industry, such as:

- Low-cost tendering, which may force designers and contractors to cut corners on materials and construction methods.
- Client expectations for short project time frames and payment for work completed, rather than a day rate, which prioritises speed over safety and standards.
- Power imbalances between different parties (such as between Tier 1 contractors and subcontractors), which can lead to adversarial working relationships, lack of team collaboration and liability being offset onto parties lower down the supply chain which have limited agency or influence.

In this context, experts said that it is critical that any strategy to drive improvement in industry culture must focus on establishing positive building and safety culture ‘upstream’ in the project process, when products are being designed and manufactured, and projects are being commissioned and designed, as this can have a disproportionately large effect on what happens ‘downstream’ in the construction and management phases of the building development cycle. Some believed that without addressing these underlying issues, any strategy to drive improvement in industry culture would be unlikely to succeed.

Experts stated that awareness, attitudes and behaviours relating to the culture change agenda varied across different parts of industry. They felt that awareness was highest overall among those working in professionalised roles who have needed to engage with the HRB building control process or work that supports the development of HRB safety cases. These include: architects and engineers, building inspectors, Tier 1 contractors and high-rise building owners/operators. By contrast, they identified small construction businesses, self-employed contractors in construction and building trades working on domestic projects as being less likely to be aware of the agenda. This was because these organisations and individuals were less well connected with industry and new developments in regulation. Even where they were aware of the agenda, they presumed it related primarily to HRB work and so was of limited relevance to them.

Furthermore, the term ‘culture’ was not consistently understood by participants. While those in more senior and/or oversight roles were more familiar with it, those working in more junior and/or practitioner roles found it harder to grasp. The phrase ‘built environment’ was also unfamiliar to many. Additionally, different groups tended to interpret ‘safety’ variously, depending on their role. For example, architects took it to mean holistic safety across a build, specialists like engineers focused on specific aspects of safety (such as fire or structural safety), and construction workers tended to conflate it with on-site occupational health and safety practices.

Once the concept of building safety and standards was explained in more detail, participants were generally open to the need for culture change. Awareness of the Grenfell Tower fire was high and participants spontaneously highlighted key areas they believed needed to change. These included: client focus on price, and sub-optimal relationships between different parties across the building development cycle. Some also mentioned examples of good work to improve culture that they knew was currently under way.

However, the appetite for change was mixed. Those with the highest awareness of the need for change tended to believe they were already acting to improve it and could list a

range of actors they felt should be more engaged (e.g., leaders in organisations, those working on domestic projects and construction workers). Having said this, these latter groups that were highlighted as needing to change generally believed that the onus should not necessarily be on them, believing that clients and employers need to be enabling change, with government and regulators enforcing existing regulation.

## **Industry performance on the drivers of culture change**

The Culture Framework that sets out the five key drivers of positive culture in industry was shown to participants (Figure 1). While participants reported that '*Awareness*' of the culture change agenda was mixed overall, awareness of the importance of safety (rather than safety and standards) had risen across industry in response to the Grenfell Tower fire. It was highest among those working on HRBs, and for professional and sector bodies. Culture change was less salient for other groups, who felt prevented from engaging with it due to contractual pressures and insufficient regulatory clarity and consistency. Those working on domestic projects were especially likely to feel the relevance of the agenda was low for them and so were unlikely to engage with it even if they were aware.

Some groups were focusing on '*Accountability & Leadership*', especially those organisations aware of the agenda that were thinking about it at a strategic level, such as social housing providers, Tier 1 contractors and some specialist consultants. The main barrier mentioned to improving performance on this driver was fear of liability, which was agreed to be extremely difficult to overcome for many in the current context.

There was some evidence of good practice in relation to '*Competence & Conduct*', although the focus tended to be on competence rather than conduct. Most progress had been made among the most highly regulated and/or trained parts of industry (e.g. architects, engineers, gas fitters, electricians). However, participants felt that industry fragmentation, lack of vetting and insufficient training could hinder further positive developments.

Some groups, mostly Tier 1 Contractors, were aware of the need to lead on '*Collaboration & Communication*', for example by working with workers and organisations throughout their supply chains. However, others were much less advanced and felt that siloed practices, adversarial contracting and resource constraints currently significantly restrict industry's ability to improve in this area.

'*Consistency & Sustainability*' was the least developed driver, as positive ways of working within and across organisations are yet to be fully established. While some of the regulated professions had developed codes and assessment structures, a range of issues were identified by others; such as a lack of standardised ways of working, the transient workforce, client attitudes to cost and limited investment in innovation.

## Responses to the 'Guide for Change'

Participants were positive overall about the concept of the guide and identified various benefits, including that it could:

- Successfully prompt thought and action on the issue of culture change.
- Provide a common language for talking about culture change and align industry on how to make practical progress on it.
- Help to explain BSR's role, vision and expectations for change.

However, participants also identified some overarching challenges that the guide is likely to face. The ambition of creating something designed to reach all parts of industry was considered extremely difficult to achieve, as participants fully acknowledged the diversity of the audience and their perspectives. In this context, they felt that it would be of critical importance to tailor the framing, content and format of any communication to the various different audiences.

Perceptions of BSR's current relationship with industry also made some participants concerned about how it would be received. Those most aware of, or engaged in, the operationalisation of the new regime were often critical about how BSR is handling new processes and/or were aware of bad experiences and publicity. Participants tended to feel that it would be important for BSR to adhere to the drivers of good practice itself, and for this to be obvious and visible in how it operates day to day (for example demonstrating consistency in the delivery of its processes).

In its current form, participants felt that the guide was most useful for those leading or managing organisations who were starting to think strategically about culture change. For these groups, the guide provides a useful overview of the 'bigger picture' of culture change and flexible prompts for how to go about initiating change. Various suggestions for how to improve the guide were made, including further clarifying its purpose and how it relates to other resources available, referring more specifically to the business benefits of culture change, and merging some of the content to reduce length.

However, the guide was deemed less suitable for other groups. Some felt that the guide was inadequate for their needs. These included: those with a greater degree of cultural maturity (who had been forced to make changes in response to the operationalisation of the regime), and who were often working within organisations that had a day-to-day focus on competence. Rather, they requested more tailored detail relating to their situation and audience, including how to address barriers to action and reference to current regulation.

Others tended to regard the content as overwhelming and wordy, and struggled to grasp how it related to them and their work. For example, Resident Management Companies believed that the guide was pitched inappropriately for them, as they perceived themselves as lay volunteers rather than as working in the built environment industry. Construction workers and site managers believed the guide was more relevant for senior managers rather than them, as they felt that they lacked sufficient agency to be able to change their ways of working.

## Communicating culture change

Participants agreed that the culture change agenda will need to be framed appropriately to encourage industry to engage with it. They believed this will involve:

- Clearly communicating the shared mission of changing industry culture, including emphasising the intended outcome of protecting residents.
- Highlighting the business benefits of culture change to industry, and the risks of failing to change.
- Establishing the language of culture, the built environment, and building safety and standards.
- Setting out the role of BSR and ensuring that BSR itself demonstrates the drivers of positive culture.
- Demonstrating understanding of industry by tailoring communication via reference to issues, concepts and language relevant for the precise target audience.

Participants were also keen to see content that helps to enhance readers' understanding of the current built environment regulatory ecosystem, such as a mapping of the different parties and their responsibilities, and/or an explanation of how different aspects of the Building Safety Act (2022) are relevant throughout the building development cycle. Further, they were interested in more specific examples of how to go about putting culture change into practice and what learning can be gleaned from other contexts.

Participants wanted to see formats that go beyond written documents that can be used dynamically and flexibly. This led them to suggest providing a range of online assets and resources, such as websites, apps, video case studies, training and presentations, to support organisations on their culture change journey.

## Question set development

Testing of the question set demonstrated that it has some potential to support HSE to gather qualitative data about cultural maturity across industry. It is not currently appropriate as a quantitative measurement or self-assessment tool, as there is insufficient clarity about the definition of cultural maturity, or which metrics could be used to assess this across organisations.

The question set as it stands presents a range of possible use cases, providing:

- A set of standard questions for consistently capturing insight into culture change within qualitative research (whether used upfront in an interview to establish discussion on culture change, or at the end of an interview to elicit this information as a discrete topic).
- Individual questions that could be used within research recruitment screeners, so that data can be captured in a consistent way using comprehensible terminology.
- Questions (whether the full set or individual questions) that could be used within work conducted by other HSE teams, such as evaluations.

Most participants found the questions relatively straightforward and understood most or all of the terminology, providing relevant answers. However, some iterations are required, especially in terms of:

- Reducing the prevalence of open-ended questions on the broad topic of culture change where clear definitions are essential for gathering consistent responses, e.g. what building safety culture is.
- Providing better clarity around role identification, especially the extent to which the questions enable participants to 'locate themselves' in terms of their role and organisation within industry.
- The use of plain English.
- Avoiding implying that culture change is required to the same degree in all organisations or settings.

While the question set is currently best administered via a researcher to allow for more in-depth and nuanced exploration of the contextual factors affecting culture change within organisations and sectors, over time it may be possible to develop self-administered questions (subject to user testing).





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