

# Summary Report

## Small Businesses and Clients in the Construction Sector

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## 1. Background and Objectives

Health and Safety (H&S) performance in the construction sector has improved significantly over the past decade, with a general long-term downward trend in the number and rate of fatal injuries. However, the construction sector remains one of the most hazardous, accounting for approximately a quarter of all fatal injuries to workers. In the five years to March 2017, 196 construction workers have died. Each year (looking at the average of the last three years) 64,000 workers in the industry receive an injury at work and 80,000 suffer from work-related ill health; 4.1% of skilled construction and building trade workers are injured each year, more than twice the average for all occupations.

The majority of fatal incidents involve small businesses, and nearly half of all reported injuries occur in refurbishment activities. Risks on larger projects can be substantial but, generally, large projects are better at controlling risks than most small projects.

The purpose of this research was to improve HSE's understanding of smaller businesses' (with <15 employees) who work in the construction sector and clients' (domestic and small commercial) who procure new build, refurbishment, repair and maintenance work from the construction sector regarding their needs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours when it comes to seeking out and using health and safety (H&S) communications and support to enable the effective management and control of risk.

Key research objectives were to explore:

- H&S attitudes and practices among small businesses,
- Key stages associated with domestic and commercial construction projects,
- The roles of trades and professional services within the fragmented supply chain,
- Sources of information, guidance, and support and advice sought on H&S,
- Reactions to key communication, messages, tools and incentives, and their potential to influence behaviours.

The research explored how the above varied by:

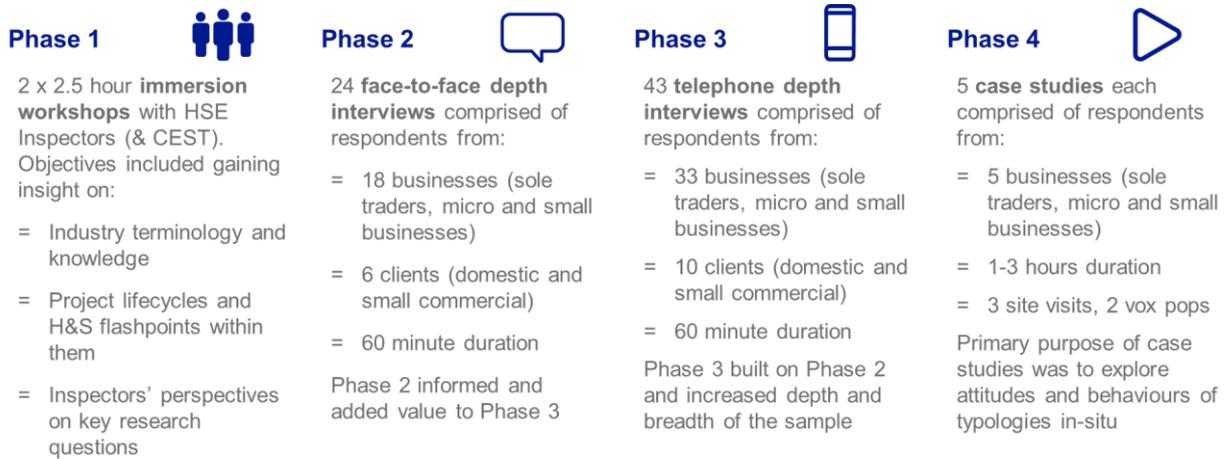
- Small business: differences by size, location, type of service provision, life stage, contractual status, type of clients, skill level, time in role, affiliation status, experience of accidents, consideration of H&S and the influence of individual decision-makers themselves,
- Client type: small commercial and domestic; prior construction project experience; and project management preferences.

## 2. Research Methodology

The methodology comprised face-to-face and telephone interviews with 51 small businesses (with <15 employees) and 16 (domestic and commercial) clients of small businesses, and five ethnographic style case studies with small construction businesses. The sample included a wide range of construction businesses, including professional services and the specialist and generalist trades.

NB: The research was conducted with small businesses ( $\leq 15$  employees) because less is known about them overall and they are historically harder to reach.

**Figure 1: Summary of methodology**



A further co-design phase followed Phase 4 and explored ideas for ways to make it easier for workers to be safe with regards to H&S regulations and how to communicate these ideas to workers. The co-design involved two 2-hour workshops in London each with 6 small businesses, three HSE representatives, and two moderators. (Four participants that took part in the co-design phase had also taken part in previous phases of the research.)

### 3. Main Findings

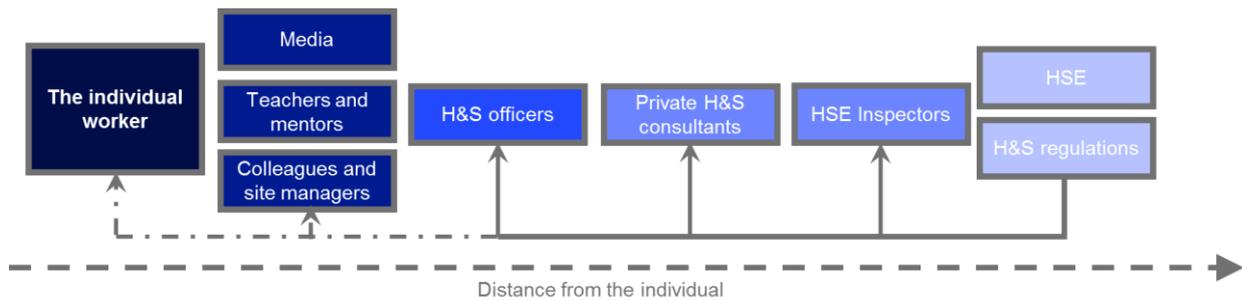
#### 3.1 Perceptions of Health & safety (H&S)

**H&S was widely associated with physical safety** rather than long term health conditions. There were a range of views about who was responsible for H&S – participants variously thought the site manager or lead contractor was responsible; each individual was responsible for themselves; or everyone on site was collectively responsible. This varied across business types and sizes.

**Multiple perceptions of H&S existed** among the sample, and these perceptions were continuously constructed through social interactions and experiences leading to more and less positive views of H&S. H&S was variously seen by businesses as: (1) there to keep people safe; (2) just 'common sense'; (3) costing time and money; (4) used to slow projects down; and (5) a money maker for HSE and construction equipment companies.

**H&S was a crowded field** and there were many players influencing the perceptions and attitudes of small businesses. A single positive or negative interaction could shift an individual's view. Influencers within a worker's immediate sphere were more able to shape their views (e.g. colleagues, site managers, teachers, and mentors). Other players - including H&S officers, private H&S consultants and HSE inspectors - also influenced workers' views. HSE was a peripheral influencer with limited control over the H&S narrative among small businesses.

**Figure 2: Influencers that shape attitudes to H&S**



**There was generally a negative view of those who performed a health and safety compliance role on site**, particularly among tradespeople. They were seen to be aggressive, too detail focused, not ‘on the side’ of small businesses, and not to understand the impact of H&S regulations on small businesses or the financial pressures they faced. However, there was confusion between HSE inspectors and other players in the H&S field who were seen to contribute to negative views (notably H&S consultants and H&S officers on site).

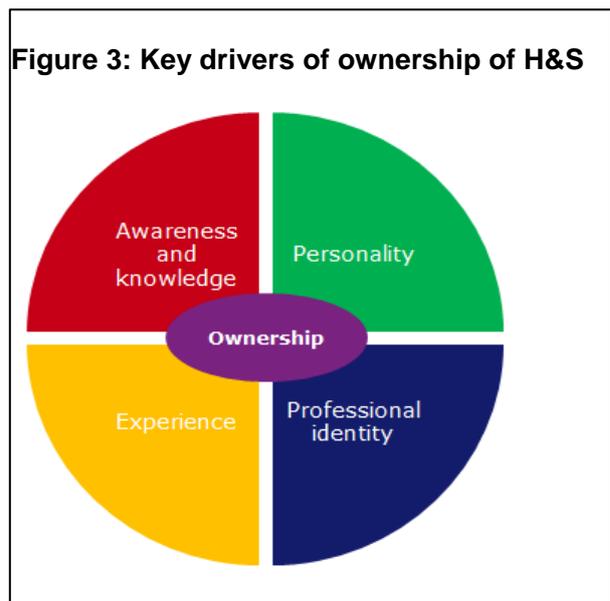
### 3.2 Attitudes to H&S

**Attitudes to H&S were complex but underpinned by an individual’s sense of ownership of H&S.** ‘Ownership’ was the extent to which H&S regulations were seen to be legitimate and ‘for me’ – meaning ‘for workers’ and able to keep them safe - rather than ‘by and for’ and imposed by an external authority. An individual’s role on site and the type of project influenced but was not the main determinant of their sense of ownership of H&S (particularly site managers).

**There were four key drivers of an individual’s sense of ownership:**

- (1) level of awareness and knowledge of H&S regulations;
- (2) experiences of H&S regulation implementation;
- (3) personality - comprising of moral and mental attitudes (how much they cared about H&S and their attitude to authority); and
- (4) sense of professional identity – comprising of their attitude to quality and degree of financial and job security.

**Figure 3: Key drivers of ownership of H&S**



**Six attitudinal typologies** emerged allied with different levels of ownership:

- **Champion:** really cared about the safety and welfare of their team (high ownership)
- **Professional:** knowledgeable specialists who were remote from the site (high ownership)

- **Earnest:** those who cared about H&S and were anxious to improve their recognised low knowledge level (medium/high ownership)
- **Pragmatist:** saw H&S as a constant cost/benefit trade off (medium/low ownership)
- **Common Sense:** thought H&S was common sense and regulations burdensome (low ownership)
- **Cowboy:** wilfully neglectful and routinely endangered himself and others (low / very low ownership).

These qualitative typologies are broken out in more detail in Figure 4 (below).

**Figure 4: Attitudinal typologies**

Ownership	Awareness and knowledge	Experience	Personality (Morality & Mentality)	Professional identity (Quality & Security)	Typology
High	High knowledge and formal training	Some positive experiences of H&S implementation	Really cares about and prioritises safety of the team	Secure professional and sees H&S as part of delivering quality work	Champion
High	Very high knowledge as core to role and had further and formal training	Some positive experiences of implementation and some H&S actors	Cares about doing work in the right way, and regulations support this	Secure professional and high level of authority within project/site	Professional
Medium/ High	Low/medium knowledge but aware of shortfalls	Mixed experiences of H&S reducing risk and actors	Cares about safety of others	Takes pride in work but lacks authority and security	Earnest
Medium/ Low	Aware but views H&S through cost/benefit lens	Mixed/low experiences of H&S reducing risk and attitude of H&S actors	Pragmatic so cares about efficiency and business success	Some security. Feels like a professional business-person	Pragmatist
Low	Low – sees H&S as common sense and generally learnt on the job	Negative experiences or preconceptions of H&S in reducing risk	Anti-authority and H&S is an individual's responsibility	Insecure. Doing honest work to earn a living	Common sense
Low / Very low	Very low and actively avoids engagement	Negative experiences or preconceptions of H&S and H&S actors	Anti-authority risk taker who endangers others and cares only about himself	Insecure and cares solely about profit	Cowboy

### 3.3 H&S behaviour on small construction sites

#### **Attitudes were underpinned by an individual's sense of ownership of H&S.**

Attitudes are important and have a strong influence on behaviour because they determine the level of engagement an individual has with H&S and H&S regulations. However, H&S behaviour was not determined by attitudes alone. On each new project, individuals' in-the-moment behaviour was shaped by circumstances which created 'push and pull' factors on their attitude and ability to action their sense of ownership.

**Circumstantial 'push and pull' factors which shaped behaviour** included efficacy factors (e.g. costs, time, and equipment) and contextual factors (e.g. site and project size, level of observation, client attitude, site culture). Individuals could be pushed away from good practice or pulled further towards it by these.

**Individuals encountered different circumstantial factors at each stage of the project.** Client budget was the key influencer during commissioning, but businesses' sense of professional identity also played a key role in shaping negotiations. Some good H&S planning was done during the design phase but this was commonly not communicated at the construction phase or to the team (particularly on domestic projects). During the construction phase, individuals' H&S decisions were constantly influenced by efficacy and contextual factors which could change day-to-day. Individuals constantly weighed up risks, consciously and unconsciously. Those with a

stronger sense of ownership were more able to practice good H&S consistently - including in the face of more challenging circumstances.

### 3.4 Clients of small construction businesses

**Clients of small construction businesses** had low knowledge of H&S regulations and were generally not aware of their obligations under CDM Regulations 2015 – particularly domestic clients. Clients did not think H&S should be their responsibility; responsibility was instead to hire a trusted professional who would have the knowledge and experience to manage H&S on the project and public liability insurance. H&S was not a priority for domestic or commercial clients; clients cared about costs, the timeline, and the quality of the job. In some cases, the presence of a client on site could 'pull' workers towards good practice. Some clients reminded workers about wearing PPE, but generally would only intervene if they saw something unsafe that would put themselves, their families, or their customers/ the general public at risk – they expected that construction workers would self-regulate and work safely.

## 4. Opportunities

### 4.1 Support needs

There are a number of ways in which HSE and other organisations can further support small businesses to improve their H&S practice. Each typology requires a different approach to most effectively drive behaviour change.

Small construction businesses currently use none or a narrow range of sources of information about H&S regulations. Whilst useful to the professional services and some site managers and specialists, H&S information was generally found to be too technical and inaccessible by general tradespeople and those who have not undertaken further education or formal training. Others felt they could do their job safely and did not need further information (typically Cowboys and Common Sensors). There was a desire for H&S information to be more accessible (simpler, jargon free and more visual), websites easier to navigate, and more human – explaining the 'real life' implications of poor practice.

Four key support needs that impact on small businesses' level of compliance emerged, and there are different behavioural levers to address these support needs:

- **Level of ownership** - alter the HSE brand to give control to businesses; move from an enforcement agency to a support and enforcement agency
- **Awareness and knowledge of regulations** - educate businesses and clients on the benefits of compliance and costs of non-compliance
- **Level of confidence and job security** - communications which empower the different professional services and trades to see themselves as professionals and have conversations about costs with clients and managers
- **Capability to employ knowledge** - design (or communication) of H&S regulations to provide greater clarity on what constitutes H&S compliant practice

Support from a range of organisations, including HSE, could help to improve small businesses' H&S practice. However, it is unrealistic to initially aim to drive everyone towards the Champion typology, and it may make more sense for HSE to work to move businesses through the typologies gradually towards the Champion and Professional in stages.