

Dramatic fall in health and safety inspections

The HSE is facing criticism from the trade unions

The HSE has come under fire for a dramatic 25% fall in the number of health and safety inspections in workplaces in the last three years. The figures came to light in the April-June issue of the TUC-backed journal *Hazards*. Having initially claimed that it did not hold the data, the HSE subsequently apologised and released it to the magazine following a series of freedom-of-information requests.

The resultant exposure of the fall in inspections, from 74,000 in 2002/3 to 55,000 in 2004/5, has prompted concern. TUC general secretary, Brendan Barber, commented, "There is a real danger that the UK's safety record will get worse unless the HSE devotes more resources to carrying out a greater number of more effective inspections. With visits and prosecutions at a new low, there is no incentive for employers to tighten up on safety, and, as a result, more workers are likely to die, be made ill or be injured at work."

Hazards also revealed that prosecutions, convictions and prohibition or improvement notices for the same period have dropped by about 26, 24 and 25%, respectively.

IOSH and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) condemned the trend. STUC assistant secretary Ian Tasker expressed concern that the HSE had diverted resources away from "frontline enforcement."

"Any other interventions in workplaces by the HSE should not be implemented at the expense of inspections, the key tool in protecting workers' safety, but through the provision of additional resources," he said.

A spokesperson for the HSE cited an IT problem as the reason for the delay in producing the data, and admitted that there had been a shift of emphasis in response to industry's changing needs: "There is more need for HSE staff to spend time educating and helping employers to bring themselves up to standard. Issues over occupational ill health, for example, can't be solved by an inspection or an improvement notice. Duty of care lies with the employers, so it's in their interest to make improvements. It's better if we can work with them to achieve real, long-term success."

He also cited significant improvement in the UK's health and safety system as a reason for

the decline in inspection and prosecution levels. Asked to respond to suggestions that the HSE is neglecting its responsibility to ensure safety in workplaces, he commented, "If that were the case, the number of major accidents in workplaces would be going up. The figures don't show that: on the contrary, they show that we have the second best health and safety system in Europe."



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