

A case of too little, too late?

With the HSE's consultation period now closed on the proposal to change employers' statutory reporting requirements, under RIDDOR (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations), from over three days to seven for workplace-related injuries, reactions from across industry have, unsurprisingly, been mixed (page 5).

The prospect follows recommendations outlined in Lord Young's landmark 'Common Sense, Common Safety' report, published late last year to revamp health and safety. It emerged in Chris Grayling's (Minister for Work and Pensions) 'Good Health and Safety, Good for Everyone' paper, unveiled late in March (page 22).

On the one hand, there is a suggestion that the approach would reduce the current bureaucratic burden, particularly on smaller companies, and that it aligns neatly with the 'fit note' arrangements. Protagonists also assert that it should simultaneously improve compliance, currently estimated at a woeful 60%.

On the other hand, many health and safety professionals are concerned that plant managers may well come to perceive three-day injuries as less serious than they really are, even though the requirement remains to record them in the site accident book. Just as important, they worry that, with far less data to keep inspectors aware, HSE will lose valuable visibility into where best to deploy its limited resources.

And 'limited' is the operative word, with the revelation, also in Grayling's proposals, that HSE is to lose one third of its budget over the next three years. Its share, no doubt, of shouldering the government's cuts agenda, but this change means that HSE's focus will necessarily be limited to high-risk locations and 'rogue employers'.

'High risk' locations are well-known and definable – although 'low risk' is a moot concept. But how exactly will this most critical of agencies keep itself informed of which are those rogue employers? Will whistle blowing be the modus operandi?

Is this another, perhaps unintended, outcome of David Cameron's Big Society mantra? It is one thing to encourage the wider health and safety community to step up its activities around health and safety advice and guidance. It is quite another to leave engineers and technicians – themselves potentially both risk makers and risk takers – at the mercy of unidentified cost-cutting employers.

It surely cannot be enough merely to hope that plant managers won't relax their vigilance, because of the threat implied by legal proceedings, if the worst transpires? When an accident waiting to happen turns into a tragedy, it's too little and far too late.

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