

The Health & Safety Authority Annual Report 2018 – a summary for the construction sector

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The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has recently submitted its annual report for 2018 to Pat Breen TD, Minister for Trade, Employment, Business, EU Digital Single Market and Data Protection.

The HSA is the Irish statutory body responsible for ensuring protection from work-related injury and ill health. This recent report is its third and final report under its three year strategy adopted in 2016. Priorities in that strategy included an increased focus on workplace health and maintaining and developing the management of safety risks. The recent annual report sets out the action taken by the HSA to implement that strategy in 2018.

For those working in the construction industry, the report serves as a reminder of the importance of adhering to health and safety rules and regulations and the potential serious consequences of a breach. The following points are worthy of note:

Work related fatalities

In 2018, 39 people were killed in work-related accidents, a decline of 19% on 2017 and also the lowest figure in the history of the HSA. The construction sector, in particular, had 5 work related deaths. The figures suggest that, whilst there has been a significant reduction in fatalities, there remains scope for additional improvement of systems in the workplace so that the number is further reduced.

Inspections and investigations

In 2018, the HSA completed over 9000 inspections and investigations. Of these, 3,700 inspections and 326 investigations were within the construction sector. Small contractors and the self-employed accounted for 80% of

those inspections. Enforcement action was taken in 60% of cases. This, again, suggests significant scope for improvement of health and safety systems and procedures so as to effect a reduction in future enforcement rates.

There were 15 prosecutions by the HSA in 2018, resulting in fines amounting to a total of €705,972.

Occupational health

Occupational health has been a key concern for the HSA, with particular focus on safe handling and use of chemicals and controlling dust generation on sites. 362 sites were inspected in October 2018 and enforcement action was taken in 37 cases. The enforcement process highlighted the need for risk assessments for hazardous dusts and chemicals and emphasised the requirement for Safety Data Sheets to be available on site. It also promoted the use of on-tool extraction and water for dust control when cutting concrete, the safe handling of rockwool and asbestos materials and the correct use of respiratory protection equipment.

In 2018, the HSA was involved in 72 asbestos inspections. In one successful prosecution in relation to asbestos a contractor was fined €50,000, emphasising how important it is that appropriate safety measures are put in place where asbestos is potentially an issue.

Industry support

The HSA has continued to communicate with the construction sector through the Construction Safety Partnership Advisory Committee. There have been working groups, further provision of resources and social media campaigns to highlight awareness of dangerous activities and to promote safe practices.

The industry is encouraged to take advantage of the HSA's telephone customer contact centre, as well as the BeSMART online portal for small business support. The HSA has already expanded the content of the popular BeSMART resource (there were over 56,000 users in 2018) and a redesign and upgrade is expected this year.

Summary

The construction industry should note the high number of HSA inspections, the level of enforcement action and the hefty fines levied on those found guilty in health and safety prosecutions. The details of the 2018 annual report serve as a useful reminder that the construction sector must continue to prioritise health and safety issues.

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