

September 2024

Health & Safety Newsletter

50 Years of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

July 2024 marked 50 years since the Health and Safety at Work Act came into force in the United Kingdom and since then it has been regarded as the gold standard of health and safety across the whole world.

The act was based on the landmark report from Lord Alfred Robens in 1972, Robens was chosen by the government at the time to chair a committee on workplace health and safety as workplace environments had become increasingly dangerous around that time.

Since its introduction, the act has had a profound impact on how employers control their workplaces to ensure they remain as safe as possible for their employees, a thought process which would have had much less consideration prior to the act being enforced.

Why the change?

Around the time of the publication of Robens report, many severe workplace tragedies grabbed headlines, one of which was the Aberfan mining disaster which tragically claimed the lives of 116 children and 28 adults and the J&S Sterns furniture factory tragedy in which 22 workers died, these were a couple of examples of many workplace tragedies at the time.

Approximately 1000 people died each year in work-related incidents and half a million suffered workplace injuries in and around the 60s and early 70s.

With the regular tragedies and the extortionate number of fatalities around that time, public perception rapidly shifted demanding that something needed to be done.

What changed?

Robens advised a series of changes to improve workplace health and safety, the first of which was to simplify the system.

A single Act (Health and Safety at Work Act 1974) was introduced to replace the spiders web of statutes and regulations that applied to workplaces.

Additionally, six separate inspectorates were replaced by a single authority for health and safety at work which is the Health and Safety Executive we know today.

Robens also identified that work itself was indeed the key determinant of risk as opposed to the workplace, what this ultimately meant was that the principles of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 could be applied anywhere work was conducted.



Robens also shifted to 'goal setting' legislation that identified to employers what they needed to achieve, which, for example, was the fact that every employer should identify the risks they are generating and manage them effectively. Previously, a multitude of individual regulations told employers what they had to do about hazards and risks that are generated, in a very linear manner.

The other huge change was the shift to more self-regulation and a greater use of voluntary standards and codes of practice. This was perhaps counter-intuitive. There were fewer fines, but less complacency – employers didn't wait for the knock on the door, they started to take action. "It made the system more flexible and fleet of foot," says Lawrence. "It meant that instead of inspectors being bogged down with a load of court cases as the only way to drive change, there were new tools in the toolkit for regulatory enforcement such as Improvement Notices." (British Safety Council 2024)

The improvement in numbers

Without a doubt, Robens report and subsequently the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 has changed all our working lives for the better.

Workplaces are much safer in the modern world and Health and Safety are now at the forefront of employers' minds when conducting their business.

Since the introduction of the act:

- Workplace fatalities have reduced from 651 in 1974 to 135 in 2023 which is nearly an 80% decrease.
- The number of non-fatal workplace injuries has also reduced by more than 80% since the introduction of the report, in 1974 The HSE estimates that there were 336,700 non-fatal injuries reported which compares to 60,645 reported in 2023.

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Looking Forward

Recent cutbacks to the Health and Safety Executive have caused concern, with the view that all of the hard work and improvements made by the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Health and Safety Executive may potentially be undone by the harsh cuts.

However, as discussed in last month's edition, Labour stated in their 'Plan to Make Work Pay' that they pledge to review and 'modernise' health and safety legislation to ensure it is fit for the modern workplace. Their plan also outlined labours' goal to strengthen health and safety laws to better protect workers, this includes increased funding for the HSE and local councils to enable much more frequent workplace inspections, which should further improve the health and safety performance of our workplaces in the future.



Increase in Work at Height fatalities

With all the positive elements of Robins report and how the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 changed how safe workplaces are, there is still work to do. Recent figures from the Health and Safety Executive revealed that more people are being killed at work after suffering a fall from height than in the last 17 years.

In 2023/2024 50 workers died due to a fall from height at work compared to 41 in 2022/2023 which is a 22% increase.

The last time the number of fatal falls from height was greater, was back in 2007/08 when the figure was 58. Since then, the number of falls from height fatalities has shown no improvement, seemingly reducing for a year or two, only for



the number to sadly rise again. **The 2023/24 figure for fatal falls from height now sits at an unacceptable 35% above the 5-year average of 37.**

In an article published by Health and Safety Matters, they identified that the AIF is urging for action: *The AIF is therefore renewing its call for a simplified system of reporting to more accurately reflect the cause of workplace accidents so that informed, preventative measures can be implemented to address the cause of fall-from-height incidents.*

AIF chair Peter Bennett OBE said: "The latest HSE fatal injury figures paint an overwhelmingly bleak picture. It's clear something isn't working. Most falls from height are avoidable, but only if we can understand what's causing them in the first place.

"Very little information is provided on the circumstances around fatal (and non-fatal) incidents, with current reporting focused on the type of incident as opposed to what caused it in the first place. This needs to change if we are to tackle the worsening issue of workers being killed, and the number of people who suffer the life-changing consequences of a fall from height.

"In our manifesto, supported by the No Falls Foundation, our clear ask of the next government is to introduce a simple, more effective system of accident reporting so that we can identify and tackle the root causes of falls from height. We're also asking MPs to show their commitment to preventing falls from height by pledging their support for the re-establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Working at Height and its important role in progressing our manifesto.

"We know that working at height can be dangerous, but we should be able to put appropriate and robust measures in place to make it safer. Too many people are being killed at work after falling from height. It's unacceptable and now more than ever, it's time for change." (Health and Safety Matters 2024)