

The bridge builders

What now for workers' safety advisers?

Patterns of employment and trade union membership in the UK have changed markedly since the introduction of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations in 1977. Trade union membership fell steadily during the 1980s and 1990s, from a peak of over 13 million in 1979 to 7.9 million in the year ending March 2000¹. As a result of this decline, and of the increasing number of workers employed by small businesses, far fewer workers today are covered by trade union health and safety representatives.

Past

For several years, the labour movement has pressed for the introduction of "roving" safety representatives to provide safety representatives to workplaces that lack their own. In essence, the roving safety representative would be responsible for several employers in a given area or sector, but not necessarily a direct employee of any of them. The system is already used in Sweden, and in 1997 a roving safety representative scheme was piloted in agriculture (see OHR 69 p.6).

Despite opposition from the National Farmers Union (NFU), an independent report on the agriculture pilot said that roving safety representatives had had a "considerable" impact on awareness of health and safety in the industry and concluded that, with proper support, they could make "a significant and cost-effective contribution to the improvement of health and safety in the industry"².

Since then, an 18-month roving safety representatives' scheme was set up in the agricultural sector, this time a tripartite initiative involving the Transport and General Workers' Union, the HSE and the NFU. In schools, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) has negotiated roving safety representative agreements with several local education authorities, allowing NUT safety representatives to visit and represent NUT members in other schools as well as their own. And in the financial sector last year, the banking union UNIFI secured a deal with Barclays to set up a network of full-time health and safety representatives covering the whole of Barclays' UK operations.

The NFU's initial opposition to roving safety representatives was echoed by other employers' organisations when, in 2000, the HSE published a discussion document on employee consultation in health and safety (see OHR 83 p.4)³. The document generated 843 responses (see OHR 87 pp.4-5), most

notable for the deeply divided attitudes of employers' organisations and the labour movement towards roving safety representatives and provisional improvement notices. The CBI, for instance, said at the time: "[We] would have serious concerns at the introduction to the workplace of individuals with powers and rights [but] no interest and no apparent responsibility."

Present

Deciding to call them "workers' safety advisers" (WSAs) instead of roving safety representatives, the HSE announced in August 2001 that it would pilot a WSA scheme in five key industrial sectors. The sectors – construction, retail, hospitality, automotive/light engineering and the voluntary sector – were chosen for their low levels of employee representation, and Leeds-based York Consulting Ltd won the contract to run the pilot. York Consulting's role is to conduct pre- and post-project research among participating employers, and to train and manage the WSAs. The HSE's role was to recruit employers.

Originally planned to include 25 employers in each of the five sectors, the pilot was scaled back to four sectors after retail employers pulled out (the project had weathered a previous, and highly public, storm between the Construction Confederation and the construction union UCATT – see OHR 95 p.11).

According to Angela Morris of the HSE's strategy division: "Each of the five sectors presented challenges in securing employer agreement to participation, and the HSE underestimated the work that would be required to secure the involvement of 25 employers from each sector . . . We realised that we would need to invest considerable time and effort with individual employers and deal thoroughly with any concerns and objections they had. Employers were being asked, in effect, to give access to a complete stranger. As a rule, employers sought (and were given) assurances from us about the WSAs' *modus operandi*, behaviour and the protocols they would follow in carrying out their responsibilities."

Persuading reluctant employers

The role of intermediaries in general, and of trade associations in particular, had a major impact on the recruitment of employers, and despite the Construction Confederation's objections, the HSE was able to find construction firms willing to participate via the Federation of Master Builders (FMB).

In March 2002, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) embarked on a nine-month project to pilot the use of roving safety representatives or workers' safety advisers in small businesses. As the pilot was drawing to a close, Becky Allen spoke to the HSE and the WSAs involved to see how things had progressed.

WSA profiles

- **Fact file:** Chris Tiff, construction sector, south-east England
- **Age:** 44
- **Employer:** UCATT
- **Health and safety qualifications:** TUC stage 2, IOSH certificate

Chris Tiff spent his nine months as a WSA working with 14 small construction firms in and around London. On secondment from his job as a UCATT organiser, Chris has worked in construction since the 1980s and been a safety representative for 10 years. "I've been interested in health and safety for a long time, and in the idea of roving safety representatives. I won a TUC bursary to see roving safety reps in action in Milan last year, where they have had a major impact on fatal accidents in the construction sector," Chris says.

Like George Partridge (see box opposite), Chris found that winning the trust of the firms he worked with was vital. "Initially the employers didn't know what the pilot was about. I didn't want to frighten them, so I stressed that I was there to help them consult with their staff about health and safety, and show them how and where to find the information and training they needed. Gaining the trust of the staff is a major issue," he says.

To build a relationship with the workforce, Chris decided to spend less time with the employers and more time with the men on site (and in the canteen). Chris says: "I was the first safety bloke some of the lads had ever seen. They were all very supportive of the idea of a roving safety rep, because I was able to talk to them as if I'd worked with them all their lives."

Like the other WSAs, Chris spent three days with each firm. "Some of the sites were very small, so I concentrated on the basics, like getting the lads to wear boots, high-visibility vests and hard hats," he says.

Feedback has been good, Chris says: "The companies I've dealt with have been very positive. I don't think they have tried to hide things from me, and several now call me up to ask how to deal with things like appointing a first aider and organising CITB courses." For Chris, too, it's been a good nine months: "I've loved every minute of it," he says.

"The construction industry needs roving safety reps – two construction workers are killed at work every week. I hope the Health and Safety Commission gives the green light to an extended WSA scheme because in construction we can't afford to let it go."

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- **Fact file:** Ray Anjolaia, hospitality sector, London
 - **Age:** 55
 - **Employer:** TGWU
 - **Health and safety qualifications:** TUC stage 2, IOSH certificate

Ray Anjolaia looked after 10 small firms in London's hospitality sector during the WSA pilot. According to Ray, the firms he worked with were very different, both from each other and from other sectors of the economy. But they all have in common a reliance on young, temporary staff who change jobs frequently and often speak little English, all of which present health and safety challenges.

"The problem is that you do a training session in one workplace, and when you come back the next month, two-thirds of the staff have left and you have dozens of new, untrained staff on your hands," he explains.

As well as the chance of free advice and training, Ray believes that employers were attracted to the WSA pilot because they saw it as an opportunity to get to grips with health and safety. "I gave them information and advice on risk assessment, but most importantly I tried to put in place health and safety committees – none of the firms had one before I went in, and these committees are the pilot's main achievement as far as I am concerned," Ray says.

A TGWU organiser and tutor, Ray delivered a wide range of training courses in the firms he worked with. "We've developed training courses for them, and some of the night clubs have been very good at providing time and space for training on fire, risk assessment, manual handling and crowd control. I wish I'd had a noise meter to measure noise levels in the clubs, and passive smoking is a serious issue in the hospitality sector," he says.

Ray is optimistic about the future of the WSA. "I hope and believe that the HSC will recommend to ministers that the scheme goes forward, but how – and who will finance it – I don't know. To have an impact, we would need a lot of WSAs, not just nine," he says.

In the sectors where trade associations had been most helpful, it proved much quicker and easier to recruit employers. Among voluntary sector employers contacted via local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), there was a drop-out rate of only 6.6% (employers declining to participate following between one and three contacts), compared with 60% and 75% in the light engineering and hospitality sectors respectively. "Support [from the CVS] opened many doors and greatly assisted the process of publicising the pilot," Morris says, and indeed the pilot was heavily oversubscribed in the voluntary sector.

As well as an enthusiastic trade association, the HSE feels that individual employers' decisions to participate depended on several key factors: the pilot involved no major cost; it had been "championed" by someone within the organisation; the firm recognised that it needed help to address existing health and safety concerns; and the firm believed that greater employee involvement would bring health and safety benefits.

The HSE also found that, before committing themselves to the pilot, employers understandably wanted to meet the WSA. "The success of the pilot in our view depended on a relationship of trust being built up between the individual WSA and the employer and workers. A 'getting to know you' meeting was seen as the best way of introducing the WSA to the employer and helping the WSA demonstrate to the employer their aptitude and competence to undertake this work," Morris explains.

Launched in March 2002 (see box, top right), without the retail sector, the pilot comprised nine WSAs working with 88 employers in 105 workplaces in England (London, West Midlands, the North West and the North East), Scotland and Wales. Most participating employers had fewer than 50 staff and none had employee representative structures in place. During the pilot, WSAs were either self-employed, seconded from their union or directly employed by York Consulting.

All the WSAs have health and safety qualifications (a minimum of TUC stage 2 or equivalent*) or considerable relevant experience, and, once they had been recruited, underwent a week's residential training in communication and information technology skills at the TUC's Education Centre in London. According to Neal Stone of the HSE's strategy division: "The WSAs have a very strong network. They work effectively as a team and help each other out by telephone or email. They have diverse backgrounds and the evidence is that they have been well received by the employers."

Stone says he has been impressed by the WSAs' knowledge, commitment and determination: "I've been surprised that they have been as well received as they have. I thought it would be difficult for them to get their foot in the door, let alone address the health and safety issues."

* The TUC runs several courses for health and safety representatives, including health and safety stages 1 and 2 (both 10 days) and a certificate in health and safety (36 days).

Employers' baseline survey

According to York's baseline survey of 83 of the 88 employers involved, almost two-thirds (53 employers) had 25 staff or fewer, only three firms recognised a trade union, and a surprisingly large number (24 firms) had been visited by health and safety inspectors in the preceding three years.

Respondents reported using a wide range of methods for communicating with their workforce about health and safety, the most common being a "top down" approach relying on managers to disseminate information to staff.

Asked why they had decided to participate in the pilot, almost a quarter said they had joined because they had been invited to do so by the HSE or the FMB. According to the report: "The other reasons for agreeing to participate highlight the factors that have motivated those employers that were approached to become involved in the pilot. In 15 workplaces, management had identified particular health and safety issues that the involvement of the WSA might be helpful in addressing. Fourteen employers indicated that they were interested in becoming involved in the pilot as they were seeking to identify activities that would contribute to improved workforce relations. This therefore highlights that employers were seeing the potential wider impact of WSA involvement, over and above health and safety issues, as an important factor in their decisions to become involved."

By far the largest number (31 employers) cited "other" reasons, such as making sure that they were complying with health and safety legislation or remedying specific health and safety failings that their own inspections had identified. According to York: "It is clear that a range of factors influenced employers to participate in the WSA pilot. This is important in considering the way forward for WSA activities and the most appropriate way to secure employer commitments."

Prior to the pilot commencing, participating employers were asked what they hoped and expected WSAs to do. Forty per cent cited investigation of workplace hazards, while a third felt they would represent the interests of the workforce. According to the report: "A significant number of employers also expected WSAs to participate in risk assessments, seek out health and safety information and carry out risk assessments. Activities identified in the 'other' category included accident investigation, supporting workers during inspections, checking policies and procedures and providing a point of contact for workers."

Most employers (67%) said they expected health and safety compliance to be improved as a result of the WSA pilot, and almost one in four (23%) expected to benefit from improved worker relations. Few employers, however, expressed any specific concerns about a WSA becoming involved with their organisation.

Only 19 employers mentioned specific concerns, such as the potential costs of actions resulting from the WSA's involvement (eight employers); creating

WSA pilot timeline

February 2002	York Consulting's baseline telephone survey of participating employers
March 2002 – November 2002	WSAs work with participating employers
November 2002 – January 2003	York Consulting's evaluation of pilot
March 2003	Interim report presented to HSE/C
April 2003	Final report presented to HSE/C and consideration of advice to ministers

WSA profile

- **Fact file:** George Partridge, voluntary sector, north-east England
- **Age:** 57
- **Employer:** Newcastle City Council
- **Health and safety qualifications:** TUC stage 3

"My name's George Partridge, and I've not got horns or a tail," is how George says he introduced himself to employers in the voluntary sector. As he believed that gaining employers' trust and building relationships with them would be crucial to the success of the WSA pilot, George says he invested considerable time and energy explaining to employers what the pilot was about: "I told them I wasn't a quasi health and safety inspector, and that I wasn't there to recruit for the union. I told them I was there to improve health and safety, and that I wouldn't be rushing to the HSE if there was a problem."

Between February and November 2002, George worked with 10 voluntary organisations in the North East, ranging from support groups to community centres. He found that although voluntary sector employers were morally committed to health and safety, they lacked either the time or expertise to take action. "The groups were enthusiastic and they were relieved, because they thought it was going to cost them money. But there is a lot you can do and give that does not cost, yet makes a substantial difference to the staff and the employer," George explains.

Despite visiting each workplace only three or four times, George is pleased with what they have achieved together. Asked which areas he decided to tackle in such a short space of time, he pinpoints policies, training and risk assessment. "I prepared a checklist in advance of my first visit and went through it with them to focus on what they needed to do and, more importantly, what they needed to document. I reassured them that what they were already doing was not necessarily wrong, that they might be doing the right things, but that they needed to be able to prove it. They needed a paper trail," he says.

He encouraged them to "invest" in policies: health and safety; stress; lone working; violence and bullying. He encouraged them to involve staff closely in risk assessments, and made some concrete suggestions about how to install cheap and effective office and personal alarms. "Don't think that just because you work in the voluntary sector, your clients are automatically going to be grateful to you," George told them. Keen to "demystify" health and safety, he also provided them with targeted, digested information, but he believes his greatest success has been in training, which has been especially valuable in the underfunded voluntary sector.

For George, as for his clients, the WSA pilot appears to have been a positive experience. "I applied to be a WSA because it was something new, and I need to have things to keep my mind active. I liked the idea of being in on the 'ground floor' of something totally new, and I've always been interested in health and safety – it's an area in which it's easy to achieve a result that makes a difference. The pilot's been better than I expected. It's been the best six months of my experience in health and safety. I have a huge sense of achievement – I have worked on my days off, and what has been really positive has been going into another workplace, being accepted, having people talk to you and feeling comfortable. To see employers feeling more confident about health and safety has been brilliant, and it's the first time anyone has ever called me a precious asset!"

Although the future of WSAs in the UK is uncertain, George is convinced that the pilot has proved their worth: "It will be a great pity if the government does not take advantage of what we have started, if it's left to stagnate. I'm not bothered what they call us – roving safety reps or WSAs – there are millions of people out there who need us."

Illustration: Spike Gemrell



tensions between workers and management (three); disruption to business operations (three); worries that the WSA might identify a wide range of problems (three); and the time that would be required to meet with the WSA (three).

Future

The future of WSAs in the UK has yet to be decided. York Consulting was due to deliver its interim report on the WSA pilot to the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) in January 2003. The report – together with York's recommendations on the way ahead – will be finalised in March, and the HSC hopes to make recommendations based on the report to ministers in the early summer. Roger Turner of York Consulting is well aware of what is at stake. "Whatever our findings, they have to be robust. We need strong evidence to back them up. There are a lot of people waiting for the outcome, and any weaknesses in the evidence base will make it vulnerable," he says.

It seems likely that, from the WSAs' and participating employers' perspectives, the pilot will be judged to have been a success. However, much remains to be done to convince the majority of employers and employers' organisations that WSAs could be effective and "politically" acceptable, hence plotting the way ahead for any scaled-up scheme will not be easy.

While it has not been difficult to recruit nine well-qualified and seasoned safety representatives to take on the role of WSAs, expanding the scheme – even in key sectors or regions – will take time and money. Although there are approximately 200,000 trade union health and safety representatives in the UK, only 130 are trained to TUC stage 3, a level that at least one WSA

regards as the minimum level of training needed. So, access to training will be an important issue – both for potential WSAs and for additional health and safety representatives to fill the gaps created in the workplaces that WSAs are removed from. According to Turner: "We anticipate that WSAs would need a strong grounding in both health and safety and interpersonal skills, confidence and self-management. It is very different from doing something in your own workplace with your own colleagues and managers who you already have a relationship with."

But training enough WSAs is a relatively simple barrier to overcome, compared with recruiting small employers to a voluntary WSA scheme. In this regard, the pilot has thrown up some interesting results. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for some small employers, fear and suspicion of the HSE rather than of trade unions are significant barriers to employer recruitment. The pilot did, however, show that intermediaries such as trade associations, and "champions" within individual workplaces, can have a major impact on recruiting employers. These are key messages that the HSE and trade unions need to be communicating.

If the scheme is to be voluntary (and it seems unlikely that it would not), perhaps other intermediaries (such as insurers) could be used to create incentives for employers to join a WSA scheme.

References

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