

Thin on the ground

Local authority cutbacks are putting service sector workers at risk of serious injury. A TUC analysis of accident trends in private sector service industries has uncovered a direct correlation between local authority safety inspector numbers and workplace injuries. Cut one, and the other goes up.

Local authorities are, roughly speaking, responsible for enforcing health and safety in the private service sector; banking, call centres, leisure facilities, residential homes, shops, supermarkets and hairdressing salons.

There are 1.2 million workplaces in this sector, with over a million in England alone. Each full-time local authority safety inspector covers an average of 993 premises.

The largest number of

premises in the sector are retail shops with 445,000 workplaces, followed by offices and catering with over 200,000 premises each.

Injury rates in the sector are lower than in those covered by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). But in 1998/99, 12 employees were killed in the sector, and over 30,000 suffered a serious injury - one every three and a half minutes of the working week.

Injuries up

Over the last three years, the number of workers seriously injured in the service sector has increased by 15 per cent (table 1) at a time when injury rates have been falling across the economy as a whole. The picture for ill-health is likely to be even worse.

Inspectors down

Between 1996 and 1999, the number of full-time equivalent inspectors in local authorities fell by 24 per cent, and the number of visits they made to premises fell by 20 per cent (see table 2).

In 1994/95, a service sector workplace could expect a visit from the local authority inspector once every three years. Now, the same employer could expect to be inspected once in every four years, and it's getting worse.

Regional trends

The number of inspectors has fallen fastest in Scotland, down from 170 in 1996/97 to 120 last year, a cut of 30

per cent. Numbers have dropped by 23 per cent in England and 25 per cent in Wales. Over the last three years, the average local authority inspector in England has seen their caseload increase by 185 premises (up 22 per cent), in Wales by 229 (up 26 per cent) and in Scotland by 239 (up 43 per cent).

Guilt glitch

Since more people are getting injured in work-related accidents, you might expect more prosecutions for breaches of health and safety law. In fact, prosecutions in the local authority enforced sector have gone down, again against the trend in the HSE-enforced sector. Successful



Table 1

Non-fatal serious injuries to working people in the service sector

Year	Number injured
1996/97	26,709
1997/98	29,960
1998/99	30,821

Table 2

Enforcers and enforcement 1994/95 to 1998/99

Year	Full-time equivalents	Number of inspection visits
1994/95	1,570	489,000
1995/96	1,520	451,000
1996/97	1,590	414,000
1997/98	1,440	355,000
1998/99	1,210	332,000

Table 3

Enforcement Notices 1994/95 to 1998/99

Year	Notices issued
1994/95	11,750
1995/96	8,030
1996/97	5,170
1997/98	4,500
1998/99	6,470

All statistics are based on figures published in the 2000 HELA Annual Report, HSC, 2000.

POOR SERVICE

- An at-a-glance guide to the service sector safety crisis
- ◆ **SERIOUS INJURIES:** One every three and a half minutes of the working week.
- ◆ **GREATER RISKS:** Serious injuries up 15 per cent in three years.
- ◆ **FEWER PROSECUTIONS:** Successful court actions down by 16 per cent on the previous year, at just 424 for 1998/99.
- ◆ **FEWER INSPECTORS:** 1999 inspector numbers down by 24 per cent on the 1996 level.
- ◆ **FEWER INSPECTIONS:** Number of visits down by 20 per cent since 1996.
- ◆ **1,000 TO 1 ODDS:** About 1,200 safety inspectors responsible for 1.2 million workplaces.
- ◆ **LONGER WAIT:** Inspection frequency down to once every four years, from once every three years in 1994/95.
- ◆ **LESS ACTION:** Number of enforcement notices issued down from a 1994/95 high of 11,750, to average just 5,380 for the years 1996/97 to 1998/99.

prosecutions by local authorities fell in 1998/99 to 424, down by 16 per cent on the previous year.

Like HSE inspectors, local authority inspectors have the power to serve Improvement Notices, Prohibition Notices and Deferred Prohibition No-

tices. Overall, the number of notices served in 1998/99 was up on the previous two years, but still well below the level in 1994/95 (table 3). In the three years between 1996/97 and 1998/99 the average number of notices served by local authorities

was 5,380 - less than half the number for 1994/95.

More information

Thin on the ground: Health and safety in the private services sector. TUC. November 2000. £5.00 From TUC Publications, Congress House, Great Russell St, London WC1B 3LS. Tel: 020 2636 4030. TUC safety website: click on "TUC" on the Hazard webpage: www.hazards.org

NO TIME TO SAVE LIVES

Local authority enforcement of service sector safety conditions is under-resourced and sub-standard, with some authorities now failing to meet their minimum legal duties to protect workers, Health and Safety Commission chair Bill Callaghan has indicated.

Revealing the latest official workplace death and accident rates for the service sector at the August 2000 launch of the HELA annual report, Mr Callaghan said: "I would like to see more local authorities treating health and safety as a priority issue when it comes to allocating resources."

There was a "need to see improvements across the board so that all local authorities meet their statutory obligations," he said.

The HSC chair added that local authority

enforcement now covered expanding areas of the "new economy", including call centres, retail outlets and the leisure industry, "sectors where occupational issues such as stress, musculoskeletal disorders and violence at work are prevalent."

The report reveals a decrease in the total time spent by local authority enforcement officers on health and safety. Provisional figures for 1999/2000 published in the report show that in these local authority-enforced sectors the total number of work-related fatal injuries to workers and members of the public had increased from 23 in 1998/1999 to 28 in 1999/2000.

2000 HELA Annual Report and HELA National Picture. Free from HSE Books (contact details page 30).

BLAIR'S BUSINESS-FRIENDLY BLUEPRINT

Over 60 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales and all local authorities in Scotland have adopted the government's voluntary "Enforcement Concordat", which ministers say provides a blueprint for fair, practical and consistent enforcement of regulation.

However, despite having two-thirds of local authorities signed up to the Enforcement Concordat, the initiative, launched in March 1998, has coincided with a haemorrhage of resources from local authority health and safety enforcement.

In Scotland, where all authorities are signatories, the number of local authority safety inspectors has fallen by almost a third over the last three years, a TUC analysis has revealed (see left), with caseloads per inspector up by 43 per cent. Inspector workloads have also

risen dramatically in England and Wales.

In a measure reminiscent of the axed business-friendly "minded to" enforcement notices introduced under the previous Conservative administration, the Enforcement Concordat requires that local authority law enforcers publicise complaints procedures and give businesses "a chance to discuss and remedy problems before formal action is taken unless immediate intervention is required."

Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking in August 2000, said he was greatly encouraged by the success of the Concordat: "I recognise the very important role that local authorities play in enforcement of regulations and would like this to be as business-friendly as possible, while maintaining key consumer protections."

www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation

Unions must act, says TUC

It's not just the number of local authority safety inspectors that is decreasing, says TUC's Owen Tudor. The number of visits to premises and the number of prosecutions have also slumped.

Although the number of enforcement notices went up last year for the first time in five years, the overall rate is still much lower than it was in the mid-1990s.

TUC says the main reasons for the continuing cuts in local authority health and safety work are:

- ◆ Local government is still under financial pressure, and in times of budget cuts, health and safety inspections are traditionally squeezed;
- ◆ within environmental health budgets, workplace health and safety has come a poor second to food safety; and
- ◆ Councillors seem to consider the workplaces they are responsible for are "safe", unlike agriculture, construction or North Sea oil.

TUC is urging local councillors to give workplace health and safety the priority it deserves, says Owen Tudor. "We will develop a guide to health and safety enforcement for elected councillors which we will distribute to union members on local authorities, and which will form the basis for local campaigns to improve health and safety action by local councils.

"And we want the Health and Safety Commission and ministers giving a lead to councillors, urging them to reverse the downward trend in local authority resources and activity. If this fails, we will be pressing for the Commission to use its statutory powers under Section 18 of the Health and Safety at Work Act to issue mandatory guidance to local authorities."

Over 1 million union members are employed in workplaces where local authority inspectors are responsible for safety enforcement.