

Ireland's approach to supporting occupational safety and health compliance: the role of labour inspectorate and prevention services

Summary

Authors: Dr Victor Hrymak, Dr Patrick Bruce and Dr Chiara Leva.

Project management: Ioannis Anyfantis and Lorenzo Munar - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

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Executive Summary

Previous research conducted the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's (EU-OSHA) has highlighted the role of Labour Inspectorates and national prevention services providers in supporting OSH compliance¹. This research report presents the findings from our research in Ireland on how occupational safety and health (OSH) is structured, delivered and achieved. It features the major state bodies that monitor and regulate OSH compliance. In particular, it details how the Irish Labour Inspectorate; the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), supports compliance. This report also features national prevention services and how this sector supports OSH compliance in practice.

The methodology for this research report utilised a total of 22 qualitative interviews. These were conducted with twelve HSA inspectors and managers as well as ten prevention services providers and workers. A literature search relevant to OSH compliance at national level was also conducted.

The recruitment of participants for this research report involved approaching the social partners, the HSA, which is also nominated as EU-OSHA's official representative in Ireland², as well as selected members of the wider OSH community in Ireland. The key inclusion criteria for recruitment of these participants was primarily involvement in established practices that could demonstrate different innovative or collaborative practices that are beneficial for OSH compliance and transferable to other EU Member States. In addition, four workers were also interviewed to provide their positive and negative experiences of OSH Compliance. Given the sample size of participants relative to the number of workers and employers in Ireland, this research report only represent an exploratory overview study of national OSH compliance. Nevertheless, the six case studies presented in the report and separately³, as well as the overall findings from interviewees and relevant literature, together illustrate key findings that support OSH compliance in Ireland. This research report also presents recent national OSH compliance data as well as a thorough description of the HSA and a comprehensive listing of national structures and bodies that provide prevention services.

Relative to other EU Member States, Ireland is performing relatively well in terms of measured OSH compliance which is reflected by OSH indicators and indexes presented in this research report. According to HSA's annual report in 2023, for Ireland's 2.7 million workers there were: 43 work-related fatalities, just over 10,000 reported work-related accidents, and 9,239 personal injury claims (HSA, 2023). During that same year, HSA inspectors conducted just over 10,000 OSH compliance-related visits and inspections to companies. They also carried out 19 prosecutions that resulted in fines of over €1.3 million, and one 12-month custodial sentence. The HSA also issued enforcement notices in circa

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Improving compliance with occupational safety and health regulations: an overarching review*, 2021. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-changing-world-work-what-works-and-how>

² <https://osha.europa.eu/en/about-eu-osha/national-focal-points/focal-points-index>

³ The six case studies are referred to continuously throughout the report. The cases are numbered as 'Case IE1', 'Case IE2', etc., IE referring to Ireland. This is further explained in the chapter on methodology.

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS1, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-health-safety-authoritys-recruitment-drive-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie1>

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS2, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-besmart-ie-online-interactive-risk-assessment-tool-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie2>

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS3, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-health-safety-authoritys-inspectors-conduct-and-style-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie3>

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS4, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/ibec-and-its-online-community-good-practice-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie4>

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS5, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-niso-community-practice-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie5>

See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, CS6, Available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-state-claims-agencys-risk-management-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie6>

10% of all visits to high-risk work sectors. In addition to those state bodies with regulatory OSH compliance roles, many national preventive service providers are also responsible for issuing OSH compliance guidance and educational awards.

The first three cases presented in this research report build upon experience from inspectors and managers working for the HSA. Case IE1 details a recent recruitment drive that significantly increased its number of staff and inspectors. This OSH compliance initiative was prompted by an internal review in 2021 by the HSA. It found that it needed to increase its total staff number from 190 to 317 in order to effectively deliver its OSH compliance mandate. The government agreed and provided the necessary funding.

This initiative has resulted in the HSA's staffing numbers increasing from 190 in 2021 to 285 at the end of 2024. Recruitment is ongoing with a target of 317. At the end of 2024, the HSA had 164 labour inspectors, with 85 conducting inspections or investigations. The remaining 79 conduct OSH compliance related duties including market surveillance, chemical safety and SEVESO COMAH sites regulation. This ongoing recruitment drive also necessitated an 11 month training period for new inspectors and highlighted the internal resources required to provide adequate supervision for these new inspectors. Issues that arose during this recruitment drive included challenges such as: recruiting suitable candidates with the necessary experience on the salaries offered, and tying up the working time of existing inspector resources involved with training new recruits.

Case IE2 details the continued provision of BeSMART.ie, which is an online OSH risk assessment tool. This platform is hosted by the HSA and is aimed at the self-employed and small companies with less than ten employees. Introduced in 2014, this case study details its continuing success in terms of engagement with this hard to reach group. There has been a year on year increase in the number of users which demonstrates its effectiveness in providing OSH compliance guidance in a sector which is over represented in terms of OSH statistics.

Case IE3 details the conduct and regulatory style of the HSA's field inspectors. It presents how they select companies to visit and how they go about ensuring compliance with national OSH legislation. In this regard it shows how persuasion is the preferred method to ensure this compliance. However, it also details that enforcement is regularly used if required. In this regard, it was found that circa 10% of all visits to high risk companies resulted in some form of enforcement action.

A further three case studies from national prevention services providers also exemplify evidence-based innovative and collaborative approaches to OSH compliance.

In Case IE4, the OSH team at Ibec, which is Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group, has implemented an online, member company led, OSH compliance community of practice. This initiative has greatly increased engagement and promoted OSH compliance through a motivational effect. It was reported that this online platform greatly facilitated discussion on how to achieve particular OSH compliance outcomes. These examples were then often implemented as they represented best practice which member companies were keen to be seen adopting.

In Case IE5, the educational and good practice provider, the National Irish Safety Organisation (NISO) takes full advantage of its very well attended social events to disseminate information to its community and to provide OSH qualifications. NISO has an all island of Ireland approach to supporting OSH compliance. NISO has a devolved regional membership structure that includes Northern Ireland, itself a unique collaborative interjurisdictional initiative. NISO places emphasis on recognising and celebrating the OSH compliance achievements of its circa 600 members with an annual conference, and awards ceremony as well as ongoing events such as quiz nights.

Case IE6 details how The State Claims Agency uses mandatory incident data to prioritise and empirically evidence OSH compliance improvements in the Irish Governmental Health and Social Care sector and other public services. The mandatory reporting of OSH incidents for this sector was introduced in 2001. This has resulted in a large database which prioritises those organisations that would benefit from visits and audits by the State Claims Agency's team of OSH related risk management specialists. The results

of these visits can also be effectively assessed with examples provided of how OSH compliance was improved in the areas of for example knife injuries, Covid 19 and assaults on prison guards.

Based on the research conducted for this report, two policy briefs⁴ were also developed, one on the role of HSA and one on the role of prevention services.

Even though the six case studies presented here provide innovative and collaborative examples, OSH compliance in Ireland, as in other Member States, still sees challenges and needs to improve. For example, after 20 years of continual decline in overall work-related fatalities in EU Member States, there appears to be a stagnation in this metric^{5, 6}. Therefore, this report also points to a number of recommendations to improve OSH compliance based on the research conducted for this report and the six case studies presented. These suggestions are detailed in this research report and policy briefs. They include a review of psychosocial risk regulation, the need to improving inspection conduct and the quality of resulting risk assessments as well as further research into OSH compliance.

⁴ The policy briefs are as follows: See EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *PB1*, 2025. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/health-and-safety-authoritys-role-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-ireland>, *PB2*, 2025. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/prevention-services-role-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-ireland>

⁵ Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work Opinion: Actions to improve prevention of work-related accidents and illnesses in line with a vision zero approach. Adopted 30/11/2022. EC, DG Employment Doc. 004-2022.

⁶ EU-OSHA - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Occupational safety and health in Europe: state and trends 2023*. 2023. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/occupational-safety-and-health-europe-state-and-trends-2023>

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European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Santiago de Compostela 12, 5th floor
48003 Bilbao, Spain

E-mail: information@osha.europa.eu

<https://osha.europa.eu>