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Health and safety inspections at work

A guide for UNISON safety
representatives



Working together on health and safety

A UNISON guide to workplace inspections

Inspections are an invaluable way of identifying potential workplace hazards before they cause a health and safety problem.

Carrying out workplace inspections is therefore one of a safety representatives most important functions. But this need not be an onerous role for safety representatives, who should not feel obliged to carry out more than they can handle. It is better to start off small with an occasional inspection, and build this up as time and experience allows, possibly to quarterly inspections.

Wherever possible, new safety representatives should be accompanied on their first inspection by their branch health and safety officer or by an experienced safety representative.

The right to carry out inspections comes from the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977, otherwise known as 'The Brown Book'. These regulations also make it clear that safety representatives are entitled to paid time off for carrying out inspections, as well as for carrying out their other functions.

The right to inspect

Regular inspections

Safety representatives have a legal right to inspect all the workplace areas they cover at least once every three months, but they must give the employer reasonable notice in writing of their intention to do so. One week's notice should be enough. More frequent inspections may be carried out by agreement with the employer, especially if there are high-risk activities or rapidly changing circumstances.

Safety representatives may make an additional inspection if, since the last inspection, there has been a substantial change in the conditions of work, or if new information on hazards relevant to the workplace has been published by the Health and Safety

Commission (HSC) or Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Substantial changes to the conditions of work include the use of: new machinery, new working methods, or new substances, etc. This right to inspect exists regardless of whether or not three months have passed since the last inspection, but the employer should be consulted first.

The HSC believes it is good practice for employers and safety representatives to agree programmes of formal inspections in advance. These will make it clear when each can expect an inspection to be carried out and would fulfil the requirement to give notice of quarterly inspections. Any changes to the planned timetable must be agreed to by both the employer and the safety representative.

The number of safety representatives taking part in any inspection should also be agreed, and this number will depend on the circumstance and nature of the inspection. Inspections may take various forms and may include a general inspection of the workplace; or inspections of specific (and possibly dangerous) activities, processes, or areas.

Also to be agreed are: the area each inspection covers (whether the whole workplace, or maybe in a large workplace just a department or floor to make it more manageable); how many safety representatives take part in any one inspection; whether one safety representative does all the inspections or different safety representatives cover different areas; and whether the inspections are conducted at the same or different times.

What an agreement should cover:

- The type of inspection to be carried out.
- When inspections will be carried out (at least once every three months) or the notice which must be given.
- The need for more frequent inspections: of high risk activities or rapidly changing work areas; after a

substantial change or new information; or whenever a safety representative believes it necessary in the interests of health and safety.

- The need for inspections after a notifiable accident, dangerous occurrence or disease, or any other accident or near miss.
- The need for large workplaces to be split up between safety representatives for inspections.
- The need to re-inspect after some remedial action has been taken.
- The use of independent technical advisers and specialists.
- The right to paid time off for safety representatives carrying out inspections.

Whatever is agreed, formal inspections must be completed for the entire workplace before the next round of inspections begin.

Inspections following an accident, dangerous occurrence or industrial disease

Safety representatives also have the right to carry out inspections if there has been a notifiable accident, disease, or dangerous occurrence, such as those listed under the Reporting of Injuries, Disease, and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR). If it is reasonably practicable to do so, notice should be given to the employer before the inspection takes place.

The inspection should only be carried out if it is safe to do so and may cover the area concerned and any other part of the workplace necessary to find out the cause. It can include examining any relevant machinery, plant, equipment or substance in the workplace.

The HSC says that the main purpose is to investigate the cause to prevent a recurrence, so it is important that the employers and

safety representatives take a joint approach and work together whenever possible.

It may also be necessary to make visual inspections and talk to people who are likely to have relevant information and knowledge about the accident or occurrence. But this does not include interfering with any evidence, or testing any machinery or substance, which could disturb or destroy evidence before an inspector from the appropriate enforcing authority has carried out a thorough investigation.

If there has been a serious incident, safety representatives may consider it important to get any workers who know anything about it to write down what they know as soon after the event as possible.

If an agreement is to be negotiated with their employer, UNISON branches or safety representatives may want to include a right to carry out an inspection after any accident or near miss (regardless of whether it is notifiable or not) or whenever a safety representative believes an inspection is necessary in the interests of health and safety. Even if there is not an agreement which covers these situations, there is nothing to stop safety representatives carrying out an inspection until they are challenged by the employer.

Carrying out an inspection after an accident, disease, or dangerous occurrence:

- Must be done only if it is safe to do so.
- Must be notified to the employer where reasonably practicable.
- Can include visual inspections and examining machinery, equipment and substances etc.
- Can include discussions with people who might have relevant information.
- Safety representatives and employers should take a joint approach.

- Must not interfere with any evidence or testing prior to an investigation by the enforcing authority.

Following an accident or dangerous occurrence, an employer may need to take urgent steps to prevent the risk of further hazards. Any steps taken should be notified to the safety representatives and confirmed in writing.

Preparing for an inspection

Safety representatives should check with their UNISON branch whether it has reached an agreement on workplace inspections. If so, a copy of the arrangements should be obtained. If there is not an agreement, the branch might want to consider negotiating one and failing this, individual safety representatives might want to reach an agreement.

If there is no agreement, appropriate notice of the inspection should be given to the employer. As already mentioned, one week should be sufficient.

A plan of the workplace and information on the type of work will be useful for a safety representative unfamiliar with the area or the work to be inspected.

Next a checklist should be prepared or adapted. There is a general checklist near the end of this guide. Many of UNISON's guides on specific hazards also contain more detailed checklists and safety representatives might want to have a look at these. Brainstorming (getting together and thinking out aloud) with other safety representatives, members and workers may also bring up points to check.

Enough inspection report forms should be copied so that notes can be taken during the inspection. A copy of this form can be found in the centre of this guide.

Preparing for an inspection;

- Check whether there is a branch/employer agreement—if not, should the branch/safety rep negotiate one.
- Give the employer notice (unless covered by the agreement).
- Consider whether a plan or further information on the work area or type of work is needed.
- Produce or adapt a checklist.
- Make copies of the inspection report form.

Carrying out the inspection

Safety representatives have the right to carry out an inspection at least once every three months, so an experienced representative should try to ensure that they do this if time permits.

During the inspection, an inspection report form should be completed. A checklist should be used to reduce the likelihood that a potential hazard is missed.

Members and other workers should be asked during an inspection whether they want to raise any issues or problems that they have experienced or witnessed, or make any other contribution they believe is relevant.

Safety representatives normally cover members and non-members. This is important because any hazard which is a potential risk to a non-member is also a potential risk to a member. In addition, health and safety is a great recruiting tool.

Management have a right to be present in the workplace during inspections, but that doesn't mean that they have to accompany safety representatives on inspections. Safety representatives should always ensure that they meet members and other workers after inspections as well, in case any wish to speak in confidence without

the knowledge of their employer or other workers. Safety representatives are entitled to private discussions with employees; it is the workers who often know most about any potential problems.

If there is a good partnership approach between the UNISON branch and the employer, safety representatives might want to carry out the inspections jointly with employers. However, they should still ensure that they have the opportunity to hold independent investigations and private discussion with the workers.

Safety representatives should also consider talking to people who work away from an employer's premises, for example drivers or home carers, to check whether they are experiencing any problems or have any concerns they want to raise. Going through a checklist with these workers will help to get them thinking about any potential hazards.

During the inspection:

- Fill out the inspection report form.
- Use a checklist.
- Ask members and other workers for their views.

The provision of facilities

Employers must provide any facilities and assistance which safety representatives may reasonably need, including allowing them to carry out independent investigations and hold private discussions with employees. To carry out their function in promoting health and safety at work, safety representatives need to be given information over and above that given generally to employees.

After giving employers reasonable notice, safety representatives may inspect and take copies of any document relevant to the health and safety of the workplace or the employees that they represent.

One exception to this right is any information on identifiable

individuals, unless they give their consent. Other exceptions are information which: has been obtained by an employer for use in legal proceedings; which, if disclosed, would be against the interests of national security; which would contravene a law; or would—for reasons other than its effect on health, safety, or welfare at work—cause substantial injury to an employer's business or to the business of the person who supplied the information.

Relevant information includes:

- The risks to employees which have been identified by risk assessment.
- The preventive and protective measures designed to ensure the workers' health and safety.
- The procedures to be followed in the event of an emergency.
- Who is the competent person(s) as required under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations.
- Risks notified by another employer sharing the workplace.
- The plans and performance of the undertaking and any proposed changes which might affect health and safety.
- Technical information about hazards and the necessary precautions regarding machinery, plant, equipment, processes, systems of work, and substances in use or proposed to be used at work. This includes information from consultants, designers, manufacturers, importers or suppliers, and the safety data sheets on all the substances.
- Details of any accident, dangerous occurrence or notifiable industrial disease, or any statistics relating to these.
- That which specifically covers employees' health and safety at work including the results of any measurements.

- That on any items, tools, or substances etc. issued to home workers.

The use of specialists

After inspections, employers' safety officers and specialist advisers may be contacted to give technical advice and explanations, and to answer any queries.

Occasionally, employers and safety representatives may wish to seek advice from outside the workplace, for example from an appropriate university. This may be the case if the employer needs to take some sort of specialist measure, such as monitoring the level of workplace noise or the exposure to chemicals.

If safety representatives need further technical advice, they may contact the Health and Safety Unit at UNISON (details at the back of this book).

Reporting problems after an inspection

If, during an inspection, a safety representative becomes aware of any health and safety problem or any unsatisfactory welfare arrangement, it is normally best to notify the employer in writing. There is a draft inspection report form that may be photocopied in the centre of this book.

It may however, be appropriate to give an oral report in the first instance, such as in the case of a particularly serious hazard where a speedy response is required and an agreement to stop the work immediately might be necessary. Alternatively, the matter may be so minor that a written report is not necessary.

Safety representatives may wish to agree with their employers that a joint inspection or tour be carried out after the safety representative's inspection so that any problems can be pointed out

and considered jointly.

If a written report is submitted, the employer is normally expected to take action to put things right. If the employer does not believe it appropriate to take any action, cannot take the action within a reasonable time or takes a course of action which the safety representative finds unacceptable, the employer should give a written explanation of the reasons for their action, inaction or delay.

If the UNISON report form is used, safety representatives should give a copy to management. There is a section where management are asked to respond giving details of the action they have taken or their reasons for not taking action, and it is best to ask for and get a written response for the record, regardless of what they do or do not do.

If there are several problems, safety representatives should agree with employers which should be dealt with first, but watch out for management attempting to resolve those problems which are the cheapest or easiest to deal with.

Safety representatives should be given the opportunity to re-inspect in order to check that action has been taken and that it is adequate, and should be given the opportunity to record their views.

If an agreement cannot be reached on stopping work in the case of a serious hazard or on what action should be taken, the matter should be referred to the branch health and safety officer who may take it to the safety committee, refer it to the UNISON region or the enforcing body (either the HSE or the local authority), or advise on raising it within the grievance or disputes procedure.

It may also be wise to report any problems found to the branch health and safety officer in case it is a branch-wide problem which needs to be brought to the attention of other safety representatives or the safety committee, regardless of whether a satisfactory response has been taken by the employer.

Members and other workers must also be kept informed about the results of an inspection, any problems found, what action has been agreed with the management, and what, if any, action the branch is taking. Copies of the report form could be placed on the noticeboards, or a meeting could be called.

Safety representatives should also remember to let the members and other employees know of any success in getting problems resolved and hazards dealt with.

Reporting back to members and other workers will keep them involved and encourage them to contribute in the future, and may encourage non-members to join up when they see how active the UNISON branch is on health and safety. After all, health and safety is one of the main reasons members give for joining trade unions.

After the inspection:

- Report any problems to management—normally in writing, but possibly also or just orally.
- Ask management for a written response (unless only an oral report was given).
- Possibly carry out a joint inspection or tour.
- If there are several problems agree with management which should be dealt with first.
- Agree with management what action is necessary.
- Re-inspect to check whether the action has been taken and whether it is sufficient.
- Keep members and other workers informed.
- If necessary, refer the matter to the branch health and safety officer.

Checklists

An inspection should cover all aspects of the working environment, work methods, and work conditions.

A checklist will help to ensure that no potential problem is missed. A general checklist is given below. The answer to all the questions should be 'yes'. If the answer is no', there may be hazards in your workplace which require further action. Not all of the questions will be relevant to all workplaces, so those that aren't should be ignored.

Also, the questions below are not exhaustive. Many of UNISON's guides on specific hazards also contain more detailed checklists. Safety representatives might want to have a look at these if there is a particular concern in their workplace.

Safety representatives may also want to brainstorm with other safety representatives, members and workers to create a checklist specific to the workplace in which they work. When doing this, any problems that members or workers may have brought up in the past should not be forgotten.

General checklist

Please adapt or amend this checklist to suit the circumstances of your workplace.

Asbestos

Have all areas containing asbestos been identified, marked and an up-to-date record kept?

Is all the asbestos in good condition/sealed in and monitored?

Has the risk of exposure to asbestos dust and fibres been assessed and an up-to-date written record kept?

Is there a plan for specialist removal of asbestos where there is a risk of exposure?

Chemicals

Are all containers clearly labelled with contents, hazards warnings and the precautions to be taken?

Is training provided in safe use of chemicals and on what to do in an emergency (spillage, poisoning, splashing etc.)?

Do staff have any complaints about possible symptoms of exposure?

Cleanliness

Are work surfaces, walls and floors kept tidy and regularly cleaned?

Electrical safety

Are all electrical equipment, fittings, and tools regularly checked and maintained?

Are staff trained in their safe use?

Is there a procedure for reporting faulty equipment and for taking it

out of use until repaired or replaced?

Is access to live high voltage equipment restricted to authorised people only?

Fire precautions

Are there separate storage arrangements for flammable materials?

Are bins regularly emptied and rubbish safely disposed of?

Are cigarettes and matches disposed of separately from other rubbish?

Are clear fire instructions displayed throughout the workplace?

Have sources of ignition (portable heaters etc.) been replaced with safer alternatives?

Are fire drills carried out regularly and at least once per year?

Are fire alarms and smoke detectors checked and tested weekly?

Are the alarms capable of warning employees throughout the building?

Are there other forms of fire warning for the hearing-impaired?

Are all employees given information, instruction and training on fire risks and precautions, as well as what to do in the event of a fire or fire alarm?

Is emergency lighting provided and tested regularly?

Are fire escape routes clearly signed, kept clear and wide enough to prevent a crush, and do they lead quickly and directly to a safe area?

Are fire doors and exits clearly marked, kept clear on both sides at all times, never left open, and do they open easily and quickly in the direction of escape and lead quickly to a safe area?

First aid, accidents and illnesses

- Is there a first aid box and is it fully equipped and accessible to staff?
- Is there a trained first aider or appointed person on the premises?
- Is it clear who the first aider(s)/appointed person is/are and how they may be contacted?
- Are travelling first aid kits provided if necessary?
- Is a clean and properly equipped first aid room available?
- Are all accidents, near misses and illnesses caused by work reported and recorded in an accident book?

Gas safety

- Are gas appliances regularly checked and serviced by qualified people?
- Are staff trained to use gas appliances safely?
- Do staff know what to do if there is a gas leak?

Lighting

- Is the lighting bright enough, especially over workstations?
- Are stairs and corridors etc properly lit?
- Are light bulbs replaced promptly?
- Are light shades and defusers clean and in good repair?
- Are windows clean on both sides and free from obstructions?

Lifting and manual handling

- Is mechanical equipment used whenever possible, have staff been trained in its use, and is there enough space to use it?
- Where mechanical assistance is not possible, are staff trained in safe lifting techniques and is there enough space to use them?
- Are there sufficient rest breaks to allow staff to recover from physically demanding work?
- Can work routines be changed to spread physically demanding work more evenly between staff and shifts?
- Are heavy items stored at a convenient or adjustable height to suit the user?
- Is the weight of loads known and clearly marked, and are they small and light enough?
- Are unbalanced, uneven, slippery, sharp or too hot or too cold loads avoided?
- Are loads securely packed to avoid them shifting or spilling?
- Are work surfaces at a comfortable or adjustable height to suit the user and at compatible heights to reduce lifting from one to another?
- Is frequent or prolonged stooping, stretching or reaching above shoulder height, or sideways twisting of the body avoided?
- Are lifting and handling needs included in patient/client care plans?
- Are staff warned about particular handling problems (for example if a patient/client is confused, potentially violent, or injured)?
- Are patients/clients given training so they can assist as much as possible?
- Is there an agreed procedure if a patient/client falls?

Do uniforms, protective equipment and other clothing that is provided allow easy movement?

Machinery and equipment

Are all staff trained to use, clean and adjust equipment safely?

Is all equipment regularly inspected and maintained?

Is there a procedure for reporting faulty equipment and for taking it out of use until repaired?

Are all guards in place on machinery?

Are dangerous machines only operated by properly trained staff aged 18 and over?

Noise

Are noise levels below the recommended maximum (rough guide—you should be able to talk with someone a metre away without shouting)?

Have the causes of noise been tackled?

As a last resort, are earmuffs or plugs provided, and are they regularly checked, cleaned and maintained, and stored in a clean and safe place?

Overcrowding

Is there enough space for staff to work safely?

Protective clothing

Is proper and appropriate protective clothing provided?

Is it effective, comfortable and well fitting?

Is it replaced as soon as they are worn out or damaged?

Are clean overalls provided regularly?

Are they provided free of charge?

Are they used only as a last resort?

Slips, trips and falls

Are floors and stairs in good condition, free from obstructions and non-slip?

Are spills cleared up immediately?

Is non-slip footwear provided where needed?

Do all staircases have securely fixed handrails?

Are trailing leads and cables secured?

Is there enough storage space to avoid stuff being stored on the floor?

Are steps or stools provided if needed, and are these in safe condition?

Temperature (working indoors)

Is the temperature comfortable all year?

Does the temperature reach at least 16°C within one hour of starting work?

Can breaks be taken away from hot areas?

Temperature (working outdoors)

Is warm clothing provided in cold weather?

Are there facilities for warming up and making hot drinks when cold?

In hot conditions, is cool drinking water provided and can breaks be taken in the shade?

Can the work be organised so that it takes place in the shade or not during mid-day when the sun is at its strongest?

Toilets, wash and rest facilities

Are there enough toilets, and are they clean and in good repair?

Are washing facilities (hot water, soap and towels) provided?

Are sanitary disposal facilities provided in women's toilets?

Are lockers (or something similar) provided for staff?

Is there a rest room, and is it clean, properly lit, and ventilated?

Are there suitable facilities for pregnant and nursing mothers to rest?

Are there facilities for workers to eat meals?

Ventilation

Are fumes, steam and stale air removed?

Is there a supply of fresh air without draughts?

Are special precautions taken when working in confined spaces?

VDUs (computer users)

Are workstations and seating fully adjustable, and are staff trained and encouraged to make adjustments?

Does seating give proper back support?

Are footrests provided where needed?

Is furniture and equipment checked and maintained regularly, with faulty items taken out of service and replaced?

Can users easily read screens, and are they flicker and glare free?

Is the pace of work comfortable and can breaks be taken?

Are users offered full eye tests?

Are reports of aches, pains, numbness or tingling in limbs investigated?

Is the work free from awkward postures, movements and very repetitive work?

Is training provided about the use of equipment, methods of work, and how to avoid repetitive strain injury (RSI)?

Violence

Have workers experienced violence or the threat of violence (physical, verbal abuse or intimidation)?

Are they encouraged to report all incidents, including intimidation?

Are there preventive measures in place to avoid or minimise the risk?

Is there anything else that can be done to avoid or minimise the risk?

Are there panic buttons, do they work, and are they quickly and reliably responded to?

If name badges are worn are only forenames given?

Is there a policy and procedure for home visits, lone working and community based working, and is this work avoided if it is unsafe?

Is information about potential incidents or clients which may present a risk passed on?

Do team discussions about clients consider health and safety?

Are clients given information so that employees are not held responsible for delays or the way things are done?

Can public waiting areas be improved to reduce tension and stress?

Can appointments be arranged to avoid long waiting times?

Do interview rooms allow easy escape whilst giving privacy to the client?

Are members of the public prevented from wandering about?

Are staff trained in what to do and how to diffuse potentially/violent situations?

Is counselling and support for the victims and witnesses of violence provided?

Other hazards (please specify)

Sources of further information

UNISON

Health and safety representatives' guide, stock no. 1684.

Risk assessment: a guide for UNISON safety representatives, stock no. 1351.

The health and safety 'Six Pack', stock no. 1660, a guide to the main health and safety regulations.

Safety representatives and safety committees, stock no. 1819, the 'Brown Book'.

UNISON branch secretaries can order these and other UNISON publications, including an up-to-date catalogue and guides to specific hazards from: UNISON, Communications Despatch, 1 Mabledon Place, London, WC1H 9AJ.

A new training video and CD rom on planning for a workplace safety inspection and debriefing after the inspection is currently being produced by UNISON Northern Region. Part funded by the HSE, UNISON National and UNISON Northern Region, its planned launch will be on UNISON's National Inspection Day (Wednesday 17 October) during the European Health and Safety Week 2001.

A range of health and safety information sheets on various hazards and issues may be obtained from our website at: <http://www.unison.org.uk/polres/safety/safety.htm>; or by emailing: healthandsafety@unison.co.uk specifying which word processing program you use (for example, Word 97); or by writing to: UNISON, Health and Safety Unit, UNISON, 1 Mabledon Place, London, WC1H 9AJ.

Health and Safety Executive

The HSE has a vast website at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/hsehome.htm>.

It includes: press releases, statistics, details of publications, and many of its free leaflets in an A to Z format.

TUC

The TUC has an excellent user-friendly health and safety website at: http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm It includes: *Hazards at work*, news and press releases, and a vast library of other materials and useful links. *Hazards at work* is an A to Z of health and safety issues and hazards. Each branch office should have a copy for use by safety representatives.

Your comments

UNISON welcomes comments on this booklet from branch health and safety officers and safety representatives. Please either write to: The Health and Safety Unit, UNISON, 1 Mabledon Place, London, WC1H 9AJ; or email: healthandsafety@unison.co.uk.

Notes