

HEALTH AND SAFETY AUTHORITY'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE IN IRELAND

Promoting effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is key to safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and internal and external processes to firms. Scientific research¹ highlights, among other things, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates and prevention services, can play. This policy brief is part of a research project conducted in Ireland to provide further insight into this topic.² The methodology for this research involved interviews with 22 participants, twelve of which were from the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). The remaining ten were from prevention services providers and workers. In addition, a literature review was conducted. The findings from this research form the basis for this policy brief.

As exemplified in Case Studies developed on possible state influence on OSH compliance (IE1³, IE2⁴ and IE3,⁵) it is clear that in Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) plays a dominant role in the monitoring and regulation of OSH compliance. However, the HSA is not the only influential OSH compliance regulator in Ireland. Other state bodies, as listed in the main report (EU-OSHA, 2025), also have important roles. The style and conduct of these remaining regulators in supporting OSH compliance remains an important aspect that also can bring complementary insights by further research. This can highlight the benefits of their collaborative and innovative initiatives.

One policy pointer that may be of interest to the HSA for further study is the more frequent use of registration or licensing legislation by, for example, the fire and rescue services⁶, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA⁷) (the health and social care premises regulator). These regulators all use their ability to require, modify or cancel registration and licensing requirements in terms of OSH compliance. This is an OSH compliance advantage that the HSA does not share to the same extent as its fellow regulators.

Case Study IE1, identifies a policy pointer coming from the HSA's 11-month-long mentoring scheme for newly recruited inspectors which could be considered as a benchmark for the training of other national OSH compliance regulators. This could also bring twin benefits of increased transparency and standardisation of conduct and style of the state's regulators.

In Case Study IE2, the HSA, through its BeSMART.ie online resource, provides free, user-friendly tools allowing small companies and self-employed to produce their own risk assessments and safety statements. This online resource also allows direct access to the HSA's labour inspectors who provide further OSH compliance support through this tool, which can benefit OSH compliance culture for Irish small companies and the self-employed. The success of BeSMART.ie can be evidenced by yearly uptake of users from this hard-to-reach groups on the labour market since its inception in 2014 and is a clear policy pointer in providing a comprehensive OSH compliance resource for these groups.

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 EU-OSHA, 2025. The main report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ Case Study 1 is available at: Case IE1 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-health-safety-authoritys-recruitment-drive-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie1>

⁴ Case Study 2 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-besmart-ie-online-interactive-risk-assessment-tool-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie2>

⁵ Case Study 3 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-health-safety-authoritys-inspectors-conduct-and-style-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie3>

⁶ See, for example: www.dfb.ie

⁷ See: www.hiqa.ie

In Case Study IE3, where the style and conduct of HSA labour inspectors was investigated, policy pointers emerge from the importance of the visual inspection process during site visits and its dominant role in assessing OSH compliance standards. One policy pointer is the OSH compliance benefit of standardising the visual inspection process not just by labour inspectors (see EU-OSHA, 2023) but also by the thousands of visual inspections conducted on a daily basis by national prevention services providers. The case study also refers to the practice by labour inspectors of requiring OSH compliance improvements during their site visits that often are undocumented. One example is labour inspectors requiring workers to use personal protective equipment or replace any missing handrails to scaffolding. The policy pointer here is that this routine and important labour inspector effect could be documented or accepted as a regular occurrence. This will add to the evidence base for the beneficial effects of labour inspector visits to companies that is currently not sufficiently acknowledged in the OSH compliance literature.

The Case Study IE3 also shows the different standards of risk assessments encountered by labour inspectors during their visits to companies to monitor and regulate OSH compliance. The labour inspectors reported that while the standard and content of risk assessments generated by BeSMART.ie (see Case Study IE2) and larger companies were generally better, they often were introduced to risk assessments that were not up to the required standard in terms of content or quality. In the case study it therefore appears beneficial as a policy pointer to introduce better standardisation for risk assessment formats as well as the prior conduct of site inspections that provide the information for subsequent risk assessments. Such standardisation has already been nationally implemented for fire risk assessments inspection competency, conduct and content. Competency and conduct criteria for fire safety are provided by the National Directorate of Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM, 2022). Further examples of standardised templates for fire risk assessments are also provided by LGA (2024), and PAS 79-1:2020.

A further policy pointer is to increase the provision, collection and analysis of OSH incident data in addition to current national mandatory requirements to report accidents and dangerous occurrences at work.⁸ This would be of benefit as the State Claims Agency as detailed in Case Study 6⁹ evidenced the utility of generating large amounts of high-quality data in terms of supporting OSH compliance. The Irish Government introduced legislation requiring the mandatory reporting of OSH-related incident data in health and social care-related state bodies in 2001. The State Claims Agency now has extensive experience of using these data to support OSH compliance which it uses to reduce accidents and incidents. A possible initiative that could be advantageous would be to extend this legislation in the first instance to additional state bodies, as well consider other high-risk sectors in the economy that could be influenced into incorporating additional OHS reporting requirements.

Another policy pointer could refer to the HSA's regulation of psychosocial risk management which remains challenging. This is a result of the intrinsic difficulties of applying current OSH compliance legislation to the enforcement of psychosocial hazards. In order to improve the HSA's capacity to better enforce this aspect of OSH compliance, the applicable legislation needs to be reviewed.

Given the importance of European Labour Inspectorates regarding OSH compliance, it would be advantageous for OSH researchers to collaborate far more with such regulators who have a great deal of existing data. To facilitate this initiative, Inspectorates can have their data anonymised for confidentiality. These data would be very beneficial in terms of further OSH-related correlational and experimental research. If this increased research collaboration can be achieved, it will greatly benefit OSH compliance. However, it remains that without empirical evidence it will be difficult to fully identify which particular OSH compliance initiatives are the most beneficial for a particular work sector.

Regarding its future direction, the CEO of the HSA, at the 2024 NISO conference,¹⁰ stated that the following initiatives will be forthcoming:

- a new strategy document covering 2025-2027,
- an expanded role for safety representatives,
- an increased focus on occupational health,

⁸ Guidance on the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Reporting of Accidents and Dangerous Occurrences) Regulations 2016.

⁹ Case Study 6 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irish-state-claims-agencys-risk-management-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie6>

¹⁰ NISO, 2024. NISO 60th Annual Conference, keynote speech presented by Conor O'Brien CEO of the HSA October 2024, Killarney Ireland.

- wearable safety technology used by workers,
- AI and predictive analytics used by workers,
- the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), and
- platform and gig workers.

The HSA's collaborative and innovative approach, as exemplified in Case Studies IE1, IE2 and IE3, will underpin and impact on all these future initiatives. The regular publication by the HSA of its guidance, advice and reports will also offer an opportunity to assess the effects on these listed initiatives from its collaborative and innovative approach to OSH compliance.

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

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

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