

## IRISH HEALTH & SAFETY AUTHORITY'S RECRUITMENT DRIVE: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE IE1)

### 1 Introduction

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 research<sup>1</sup> highlights, among other things, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates and prevention services, can play. This case study is part of a research project conducted in Ireland to provide further insight into this topic.<sup>2</sup>

A post-pandemic review of how the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) was delivering its mandate was conducted by the HSA in 2021 and communicated to the government. As a result, there was a government decision to invest additional resources in the HSA. In 2020, there were 190 staff employed at the HSA. The review and government decision indicated the required number was 317, to include inspector staff, support staff and management. The review identified that, in total, an additional 127 staff needed to be recruited.

Drivers for this increase in staff numbers included:

- a clear need for additional inspectors to monitor and enforce existing workplace safety legislation and organisations;
- the substantial growth in awareness of psychosocial-related risks and green energy as well as new and emerging technologies; and
- the introduction of additional work-related safety legislation that needed monitoring and enforcement and in particular chemicals safety legislation, including the REACH directive and its market effects.

The first tranche of regulatory inspector staff recruited were appointed in 2021. To date, the Authority has recruited over 147 additional staff and current levels are now at 273. Of these 273 employees, 164 are inspector-grade and therefore authorised to monitor and regulate OSH compliance. Of these 164 inspectors, 85 are field-based and conduct inspections or investigations. Seventy-nine of these inspectors conduct non routine and nationally dispersed OSH compliance related duties in workplaces including market surveillance, chemical safety and regulate major accident hazards sites (that fall under the SEVESO Directive).

This case study will describe and discuss this innovative recruitment drive, which is notable as along with Portugal<sup>3</sup> it represents one of the very few major increases in OSH regulatory staff among EU Member States within recent times.

### 2 Methodology

Two HSA staff were interviewed for this research.

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> EU-OSHA, 2025. Ireland's approach to supporting occupational safety and health compliance: the role of labour inspectorate and prevention services. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

<sup>3</sup> Portugal increased its labour inspectors from 303 in 2018 to 448 in 2024 and all visits are conducted in pairs. Source: How to advance compliance with OSH regulations, an overview of different national strategies workshop. Held at EU-OSHA in Bilbao 12-13 November 2024.

### 3 Main findings

This increase in HSA staff numbers had to be carefully planned. This was to manage the onboarding process for so many new staff. This included the need for senior staff to mentor their new junior colleagues and taking the senior staff away from their existing duties and workload. Therefore, the appointment of the additional staff was carried out on a phased basis with three to four recruitment campaigns carried out per year. Two recruitment agencies were appointed to assist in this. One specialised in finding field inspectors and one agency was specifically addressing administrative staff including IT and human resources roles. After each recruitment campaign a review was conducted to assess the effectiveness of this approach and to see if any improvements could be made.

Regarding inspector recruitment, a major stumbling block was finding applicants with the appropriate level of required experience that matched the pay scales on offer. The HSA only selected candidates for employment who already had experience in the sectors they were expected to inspect and regulate. Hence, these candidates would have worked for a number of years in the major relevant sectors, for example construction, manufacturing, agri-business, transport and so on, to demonstrate their OSH compliance experience. In addition, eligibility criteria required potential candidates to be educated to university degree level or equivalent as a minimum. Compromise on either experience, qualifications or pay scales was not possible due to set HSA or government criteria. Finding the right candidates was challenging.

In order to assist with recruitment, the HSA put in a great deal of effort into illustrating that it was an attractive place to work. This included conducting market research that revealed the HSA already had a good brand image that contributed to its attractiveness as a place to work. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the two HSA staff who were interviewed for this case study:

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*'Our brand is strong which makes the place more attractive'.*

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The HSA's initiative in establishing and publicising itself as an attractive and rewarding employer to work for, can also be considered an OSH regulatory innovation. Improving the public image of national Labour Inspectorates is seen as an advantageous innovation and one that benefited the HSA in terms of its recruitment drive.

The recruitment drive also required the Authority to plan and manage the onboarding process. To be successful, the HSA found that the probationary period for new inspectors had to be carefully managed. Due to Irish employment law, a decision was needed for each new inspector in terms of their suitability after the 11-month mark, and prior to the legally significant one-year period of employment.

To ensure this probationary period was successful, the HSA implemented a 'new inspector development programme'. As part of this programme, existing senior inspectors were assigned to newly appointed inspectors and tasked with mentoring them during this 11-month period.

These senior inspectors would cover all aspects of the required training that included accompanied and supervised inspections and regular reviews to ensure suitability. A specific training programme and educational resources were developed by the HSA for use during this probationary period. After 20 days of accompanied inspections and five days of supervised inspections, the inspectors would be deemed suitable for inspecting independently. The inspector's performance was monitored closely for 11 months. After the 11-month period, the relevant senior inspectors would sign off on the suitability of their probationary inspectors.

The main issue with this new inspector development programme was that it was very resource- and time-intensive for the senior inspectors involved. As a result, the yearly number of inspections conducted by the HSA inevitably did not increase in 2023 despite the increase in inspectors. However, this mentoring process was highly effective in successfully developing probationary staff to the standard required by the HSA as reported by the two HSA staff who were interviewed for this case study.

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*'This mentoring is the only way to get new inspectors up to the required standard'.*

*'Mentoring the inspectors gives them the confidence to monitor compliance in any organisation they visit'.*

*'The development programme used during the probationary period is really robust and works very well'.*

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As part of the recruitment drive, the HSA also carried out an organisational redesign. One challenge this redesign had to deal with was how to manage the inevitable changes that would affect existing staff, as reported by the two HSA staff who were interviewed for this case study, for example:

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*'how will I be affected, will I get extra staff, and who will be my new manager'.*

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But in overall terms the recruitment drive and onboarding process worked very well and is now close to completion as reported by the two HSA staff who were interviewed for this case study.

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*'We are very happy with the way our recruitment drive has been managed and how it has all bedded down now'.*

*'Due to the new inspector development programme, our inspection data has remained relatively unchanged until quite recently'.*

*'We are now at the cusp of seeing our inspection rates climb significantly due to our new field inspectors'.*

*'We should be clearly seeing the effects of the increased number of inspectors on accident rates in the next couple of years'.*

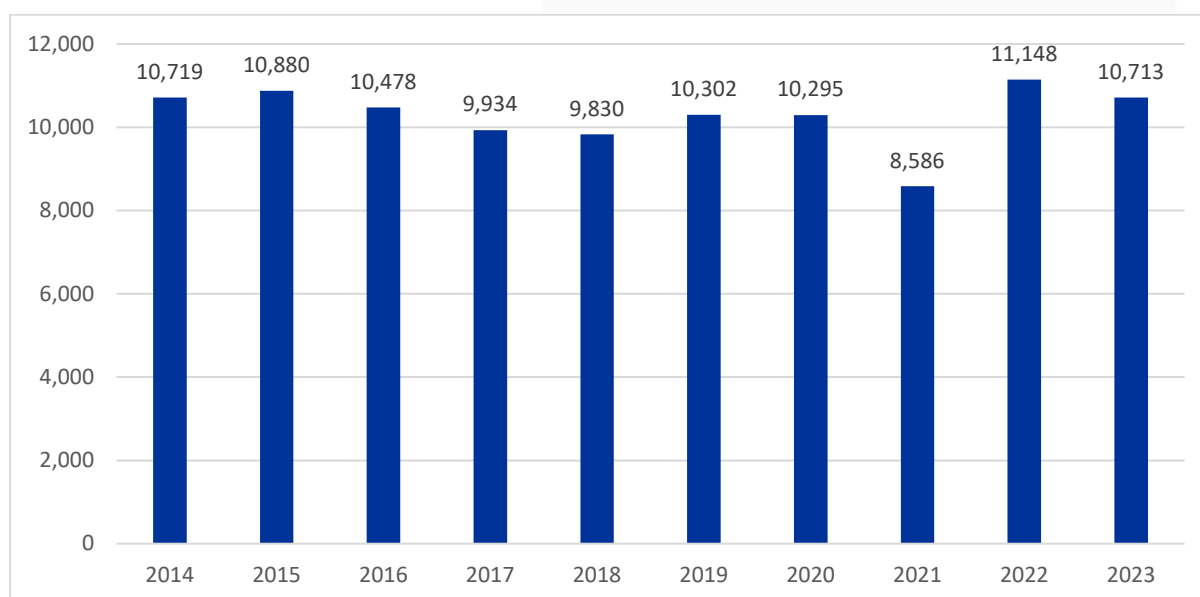
*'We are in a much better place now to meet our mandate and we are providing an excellent work environment for our staff'.*

*'Our retention rates have been very good'. 'We can now plan our campaigns and target those sectors that need our attention'.*

*'We have been able to create two new divisions, one dealing with occupational hygiene and one for the education sector'.*

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The number of inspections conducted by the HSA between 2014 and 2023 is detailed in Figure 1 (HSA, 2023) together with a sectoral breakdown for 2023. The majority of workplaces (87% in 2023) were not notified prior to inspection.

**Figure 1: Number of workplace inspections and investigations for 2014-2023**

Source: HSA, 2023

In May 2024, senior managerial staff from the HSA were asked to appear before a joint Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment. In this forum, they were asked questions by Teachta Dala (Members of Dail Eireann, the Irish Parliament) on work-related inspections. Illustrating current market difficulties in recruitment, it was reported by the HSA that it still has a 14% vacancy rate, which is principally caused by staying within government-required pay scales. Even with this vacancy rate, Table 1 derived from the HSA's most recent annual report still illustrates the high number of OSH workplace inspections and investigations by economic sector and enforcement action in 2023.

**Table 1: Inspections and sanction activity by work sector**

| Economic Sector   | Inspections & investigations | Improvement notice or direction | Prohibition notice | Written advice |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing                                   | 1,388                        | 78                              | 24                 | 631            |
| Mining & Quarrying  | 320                          | 36                              | 39                 | 236            |
| Manufacturing   | 1,515                        | 59                              | 26                 | 1,151          |
| Water supply, sewerage, waste management & remediation activities | 362                          | 16                              | 19                 | 252            |
| Construction  | 2,119                        | 37                              | 144                | 1,407          |
| Wholesale & retail trade, repair of motor vehicles & motorcycles  | 1,204                        | 62                              | 11                 | 874            |
| Transportation & storage  | 578                          | 18                              | 6                  | 431            |
| Accommodation and food services activities                        | 624                          | 23                              | 4                  | 497            |

| Economic Sector                              | Inspections & investigations | Improvement notice or direction | Prohibition notice | Written advice |
|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Administrative & support services activities | 664                          | 15                              | 9                  | 421            |
| Human health and social work activity        | 622                          | 28                              | 1                  | 470            |
| Other sectors                                | 1,317                        | 32                              | 7                  | 1,007          |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>10,713</b>                | <b>404</b>                      | <b>290</b>         | <b>7,373</b>   |

Source: HSA, 2023

Improvement or direction notices are issues by labour inspectors when specific OSH improvements are required, for example, providing adequate machinery guarding or improving safety management procedures. A prohibition notice requires a work activity to be stopped or curtailed, for example, not allowing work to continue until adequate scaffolding is provided for access. A further explanation of sanction powers available to national Labour Inspectorates can be found in EU-OSHA's discussion paper on systems of sanction (EU-OSHA, 2023). In addition, for 2023, the HSA conducted a total of 19 prosecutions that resulted in fines of over €1.3 million as can be seen in Table 2, also from the HSA's annual report for 2023 (HSA, 2023). In addition, 2023 saw the first national custodial sentence for an employer. In this prosecution, the judge handed down a 12-month prison sentence on a farmer due to a fatality and serious injury to two employees (HSR, 2024).

**Table 2: Judicial proceedings, sentences and fines**

| Type of Proceedings | Total heard | Dismissal | Under appeal | Suspended Sentence | Custodial sentence | Community service | Probation act | Compensation order | Fines EUR        |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------------|
| On indictment       | 15          | 1         | 0            | 1                  | 1                  | 0                 | 0             | 0                  | 1,371,500        |
| Summarily           | 4           | 0         | 0            | 0                  | 0                  | 0                 | 0             | 0                  | 6,000            |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>19</b>   | <b>1</b>  | <b>0</b>     | <b>1</b>           | <b>1</b>           | <b>0</b>          | <b>0</b>      | <b>0</b>           | <b>1,377,500</b> |

Source: HSA, 2023

This recruitment drive is still being pursued with a total of 49 new employees appointed in 2023. However, as other employers in Ireland have experienced, vacancies still exist across the HSA and it is yet to achieve its target establishment of 317. Hence, the HSA's recruitment drive is continuing. Even though the HSA has a 14% vacancy rate, it is clear that this recruitment drive has been effective. Increasing the HSA's total number of employees from 190 to 273 over a three-year period represents a major achievement.

Also of note from this recruitment drive is the successful manner in which new recruits are mentored in the complex role that reflects modern-day labour inspection customs and practices (see for example, EU-OSHA, 2021, 2023). Another case study for Ireland developed by EU-OSHA (Case IE3)<sup>4</sup> specifically investigated the conduct and OSH compliance style of HSA inspectors, which was found to be predominantly persuasive but included using sanction powers when deemed necessary. One of the interviewees in that case study was a relatively recent recruit who successfully went through the mentoring procedures described above and was interviewed for this research. This inspector reported

<sup>4</sup> EU-OSHA, 2025. Ireland's approach to supporting occupational safety and health compliance: the role of labour inspectorate and prevention services. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>



a conduct and style that reflected this predominantly persuasive approach but clearly stated their regular use of sanction powers when necessary.

## 4 Innovation

This recruitment drive initiative serves as an innovative example of a European Member State that has significantly increased its OSH regulatory capacity in recent years. This is in sharp contrast to EU Member State Labour Inspectorates and represents an innovative national OSH compliance initiative. The additional 127 staff planned for this recruitment drive also evidences how positively the coalition government at the time viewed the importance and necessity of providing an increased national OSH regulatory capacity.

## 5 Transferability to other EU Member States

The decision on whether to increase national Labour Inspectorate employee numbers is depended on the circumstances in the individual EU Member States. The Irish case shows how it can be done successfully. While there will be onboarding issues such as required probationary periods and differences in national legislation to contend with, such increases in inspectorate resources have been exemplified and can be transferred.

## 6 Conclusion

The recent increase in employee numbers at the HSA represents a significant development for OSH regulation in Ireland. The HSA currently has 164 inspectors and the running costs of this state body for 2024 was over €34 million (HSA, 2023). With this greater number of inspectors and the necessary support staff, the HSA can meet its mandate far more effectively. In this regard, the literature on the role of labour inspectors (EU OSHA, 2023c) has found them to have an overall positive effect on OSH compliance.

This recruitment drive has been challenging due to market conditions and the HSA has not yet completed its recruitment drive. In short, employment levels in Ireland are high and there is a shortage of suitable candidates for recruitment in all Irish work sectors. In addition, the full effects of this recent increase in inspectors on OSH regulation has yet to be demonstrated in terms of overall numbers of inspections conducted. This is because of the logistics involved in training and onboarding such a large number of new inspectors and support staff. This means that existing inspectors were tasked with training and mentoring new inspectors, thereby reducing their time spent on site visits. But even within a short time frame, the effects are being seen with: increased regulation in market surveillance and accreditation; a greater number of campaigns; far more engagement and committee work with the wider Irish, European and international OSH community; more staff for the BeSMART.ie online resource (Case IE2); the production of additional guidance documents in multiple languages; and the introduction of a new occupational health and education division for the Authority. A full listing of the key achievements for 2023 that reflects this increase in HSA employee numbers is further detailed in the annual report (HSA, 2023).

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