

Inspection guide

Inspections

One of the main functions of a Health & Safety Rep (HSR) is to carry out or participate in inspections. This is a simple process but it's important. If you are a new HSR, you may want to be accompanied by a more experienced representative on your first inspection.

Inspections do more than just help identify potential hazards, they also show your workmates that you are taking your responsibilities as a safety representative seriously.

Formal inspections are no substitute for daily observation but they provide a useful opportunity to carry out a full-scale examination of all or part of the workplace. Remember, an inspection is not just looking around your workplace, it includes the inspection of documents required by health and safety legislation such as risk assessments and certificates relating to the testing of equipment. Inspections are also a great opportunity to talk to your workmates.

Some HSRs like to do the inspection on their own or with other reps and then meet management later on to report their findings. Others prefer to be accompanied by a manager or the health and safety advisor/manager. Both have their advantages.

Management does have to right to be present if they insist, but try and take an opportunity to speak to workers on their own without management present.

You do not have to do all the workplace at one time, you can break it up and do separate inspections. If there are several HSRs, make sure you have all agreed who does what. You can either divide the workplace up between you or inspect it as a group. If there are shifts in your workplace, make sure that you inspect at different times, as some problems may only be apparent on shifts. Also remember to include groups like cleaners and security staff who may work outside standard hours.

Following an inspection, HSRs should complete a Report Form, recording the date, time and details of an inspection. REP-CENTRAL includes a template Report Form that you can use. One copy of the completed form should be sent to the employer and one copy should be retained by yourself for your own records and for reference during Health & Safety Committee discussions.

However, if a problem is identified that requires immediate action by the employer, do not rely on a form. You should also tell them verbally, immediately.

Preparing for an inspection

You should prepare in advance for an inspection. It is often a good idea to agree a date in advance and put up a notice, telling employees when the inspection will take place. You can ask them to let you know in advance if there are any specific problems they want you to look at.

Before you start, check the accident register and get details of any reports. You should also ask your employer to show you the risk assessments and any safety cases, inspection records, training records and safety data sheets. You are entitled to see these by law. In the case of risk assessment forms, it is useful to take these with you during the inspection to check whether they have covered all likely risks.

Many HSRs use a checklist for their inspections. A sample Inspection Checklist is available on REP-CENTRAL. You should adapt it to suit your own needs - not all elements might be relevant to your workplace.

Carrying out an inspection

Use the checklist and fill in the Report Form as you go round. However, an inspection is not just about ticking off boxes. Take the opportunity to talk to workers about any issues or problems.

Don't just look at issues such as physical hazards when you do your inspection. Problems such as workload, working time and training are just as important.

Take your time and make plenty of notes. On some issues you may have to seek advice later on from your union or health and safety manager.

Inspections after an incident

Where there has been an accident, dangerous occurrence or a notifiable disease, although you should still notify your employer in advance, it is important that the inspection takes place as soon as possible. However, do not investigate until you are sure that the workplace is safe. If there has been a serious incident that led to someone being badly injured, or there has been a major occurrence such as the collapse of scaffolding, the area should be treated as a crime scene and not be touched until WorkSafe inspectors have seen it.

In addition to doing an inspection, HSRs should get anyone who witnessed the incident to write down details of what happened while it is still fresh in their mind.

Work should not start until the cause of the incident has been determined and measures put in place to ensure that it cannot happen again. If your employer does try to restart work after a serious incident without an investigation, contact your union for advice immediately.

Reporting problems after an inspection

HSRs should record every health and safety problem or any unsatisfactory welfare arrangement on the Report Form. Serious problems should also be notified verbally, immediately.

The Report Form should be submitted to your employer. Many HSRs also put a copy on the notice board so all employees can see it. This is a good way of involving workers and showing the value of your role.

However, that is not the end of it. HSRs must also make sure that management acts on the report. Where remedial action is not considered appropriate, or cannot be taken within a reasonable period of time, or the form of remedial action is not acceptable to the safety representatives, then the employer should explain the reasons and provide them in writing to the HSRs.

If there are several problems, you may want to try to agree with management a timetable for getting things done. However, if there is a serious matter that is likely to cause injury or illness and your employer is not treating it with the urgency it deserves, please contact your union immediately for advice.

Even after management agrees a programme to rectify identified problems, you will need to check that the measures have been carried out by the agreed date.

The New Zealand Institute of Safety Management acknowledges the UK's Trade Union Congress (TUC) as a key source of information for developing this guide.