

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

DATE: Wednesday 3 June 2020

TIME: 15:00-16:00

Method: Zoom Meeting

CHAIR: Chris Stephens MP, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary on Working at Height

MINUTES

1. Introduction

Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary on Working at Height, Chris Stephens MP welcomed attendees to the first virtual meeting of the APPG. Chris explained that the Chair, Alison Thewliss MP offered her apologies as she had to attend a last minute Treasury Select Committee meeting.

Chris outlined that the meeting would focus on COVID-19 and the implications for the working at height sector. He stated that COVID-19 has changed the world of work and that responding to its challenges has required unprecedented collaboration between trade unions, regulatory bodies and employers on the issue of workplace safety. He added that the meeting will consider how industry and the Government can build on recent progress to ensure collaboration on the vital issue of workplace safety continues after the pandemic and is applied to all workplace safety issues going forward.

He outlined that the meeting will focus specifically on why it is essential that this collaboration is applied to working at height, as falls from height and injuries from falling objects currently account for the highest number of workplace fatalities and injuries across all sectors in the UK. He stated that the APPG on Working at Height seeks to understand the root causes and propose effective, sensible measures to reduce this toll and send people safely home from work.

2. **Mark Keily, Health, Safety & Environmental Director, Loxam PAD & Nationwide Platforms**

Chris Stephens then introduced the first of three speakers who, as industry experts, spoke in detail about COVID-19 and the implications for working at height.

Mark Keily said that since lockdown, despite critical infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Nightingale hospitals, the construction industry has drawn to a halt. He said, by association, training people to work at height has also stopped and it has subsequently become a difficult long-term issue that needs to be addressed, particularly if the industry is serious about reducing the number of working at height fatalities and serious injuries.

He added that it was important for construction federations and businesses to work together and share solutions and best working practices. He said that through the initial collaboration, it has been easier to publish guidance giving an idea about how and when people should return to work safely.

Mark said that there was a lot of innovation in working practices as a result of COVID-19. He noted that many businesses and federations had moved online allowing for easier communication with people. He added that seminars and webinars have seen an increased uptake compared to attendance levels prior to COVID-19, and referenced that more people were undertaking online training.

Mark stated that the richer the reported data is for incidents, the better decisions can be made around health and safety while working at height. He also said that COVID-19 has shown that businesses can be highly adaptive and collaborative when necessary. He concluded by saying that he hopes to see the momentum, which has been built up throughout COVID-19 collaboration, continue long into the recovery so that falls from height can be reduced and loss of life and serious injury prevented.

3. Mark Davison, Chair at Specialist Access Engineering and Maintenance Association

Chris Stephens MP then invited **Mark Davison** to speak. Mark said that social distancing is achievable for engineers who spend time in small teams outdoors but noted that this was not always possible. He warned that there must not be a reduction in safety standards in the rush to restart working in the country. He referenced that working at height fatalities were prevalent before COVID-19 and said that this will continue to be the case, unless there is widespread meaningful action and collaboration in the industry. He also said that there needed to be a culture change in the workplace to reduce these deaths.

He referenced the research that Connect had conducted on behalf of the Access Industry Forum, which involved analysing Health and Safety Executive data which recorded deaths from falls from height over the previous five years and identifying the local MP. Mark said that the research project showed that the deaths had a wide geographical spread.

Mark said that the effort to reduce working at height fatalities needed to be widespread as fatalities and injuries occur across various different sectors such as transport, construction and farming, and throughout the country. He noted that detailed information from the Health and Safety Executive data was difficult to access and said to resolve this issue, there needs to be enhanced and quality reporting of these incidents.

In discussing these issues, he stated that he did not want to blame people or organisations for deaths from falls from heights but wanted to ensure that the industry learns from these incidents to prevent them happening again in the future. He concluded that he did not want to see any reduction in health and safety standards as a result of COVID-19. He also called for the Health and Safety Executive to work with the industry to reduce the numbers of fatalities and serious injuries as a result from working at height.

4. Jonathan Capper, Chair, IRATA and Managing Director of Lyon Equipment

Chris Stephens MP then introduced the final speaker, **Jonathan Capper**. Jonathan outlined that as a result of COVID-19, there will be difficulties around training and competency. He raised concerns with regards to those people who had trained recently, before COVID-19, and whether these workers will suffer from a skills fade.

He noted that a company has a responsibility to ensure that training competency is to a good standard. He added that there will be pressure on contractors to increase work again where jobs need to be finished quickly. He raised concerns that this could lead to shortcuts, which could lead to poor health and safety checks and an increase in potentially dangerous situations.

Jonathan stated that the return to work would also pose difficulties for workers who may lack social skills and not have workplace respect for other colleagues. He also mentioned that companies will have to deal with mental health issues and accommodate workers who have to care for relatives in the high-risk categories. As a result of these issues, he said that it was important for companies to allow workers to raise concerns. He stated that companies needed to communicate with workers and empower them to challenge dangerous situations.

He added that there should be more encouragement for workers to whistle blow in situations where there is a dangerous rush to complete projects. Jonathan also said that risk assessments will have to be re-evaluated as jobs and tasks may have changed due to COVID-19, reiterating that the return to work cannot be business as usual.

He argued that there should be more collaboration and communication between workers but also insurers, trade unions, and legislators. He also referenced the APPG on Working at Height as a focal point of collaboration.

Jonathan called for the industry to form a key point of contact as a regulatory body so that they can be seen as the go-to-experts on the issues surrounding working at height. This would also provide support to the Health and Safety Executive who have such a wide remit and can learn from industry expertise.

5. Question and Answer Session

Chris Stephens opened the floor to questions and asked the first question of the meeting. He asked the speakers what role they saw the Health and Safety Executive playing in the COVID-19 recovery.

Mark Davison said that the Health and Safety Executive has often been reactive rather than proactive to working at height incidents. He noted that attention is given to a particular incident only when there is a workplace death, but this is too late an intervention. He stated that there needed to be more enforcement action and precaution from the start of projects to create a safe working environment. He added that the Health and Safety Executive should continue to enforce heavy fines for companies who breach poor workplace standards.

Mark Keily said that he wanted to see more visibility from the Health and Safety Executive, especially with the rush to return to work. He stated that he wanted them to be present on sites and be proactive with inspections, giving advice and taking rigorous action where there are falling standards.

Jonathan Capper added that there was a need for incident reporting to include near miss fatalities and that this information must be shared more widely to improve health and safety for everyone.

President of ATLAS, Jason Hartfield said that there was a need to get the Health and Safety Executive proactively involved with the working at height industry and that they should undertake enhanced reporting. He warned that the working at height sector will be pushed, in particular, to take shortcuts to improve work productivity.

Chris Stephens highlighted that in addition to his role as Vice-Chair of the APPG on Working at Height, he is also a Member of the Work and Pensions Committee. He asked attendees to send him their perspectives on the Health and Safety Executive. He noted with enough pressure, the Department for Work and Pensions would have to respond to the Committee's questions regarding the role of the Health and Safety Executive.

Chief Executive of The Scaffolding Association, Robert Candy said that there is a good opportunity for businesses to engage with people at the bottom of the workforce with regards to a COVID-19 risk assessment.

Jonathan Capper agreed with Robert's point and said that risk assessments had to engage with people across the working at height industry.

Chief Executive at IPAF, Peter Douglas noted that the Access Industry Forum should share data and work with the Health and Safety Executive to learn the lessons from working at height fatalities.

Jonathan Capper agreed with Peter and said that sharing data more broadly between businesses and organisations would be very useful in creating broader industry guidelines for the working at height sector.

Robert Candy said that given the working at height sector is broad in terms of geography and scope, it is unrealistic to expect the Health and Safety Executive to be proactive in enforcing standards at every worksite. He said that working at height companies who breach health and safety standards should have restricted access to work.

The National Health, Safety and Environment Officer at the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Dave Joyce welcomed the discussion. He said that it was encouraging to represent the trade unions voice in this meeting and noted that the CWU represent a number of engineers who work at height. He said that trade unions support the Health and Safety Executive but that they needed to do more. He argued that the Government has undermined health and safety legislation and that the recent 10% funding increase to the Health and Safety Executive did not cover the 46% of funding cuts to the agency over the last ten years. He stated that he met with the new Chief Executive of the Health and Safety

Executive, Sarah Albon and that he raised the fact that he wanted to see more presence from the agency, more proactive involvement and increased enforcement of health and safety legislation.

Managing Director at Secure Tools for Working at Height, Edwin Thomas spoke about the need to talk more about deaths as a result of falling objects from height.

Managing Director of PASMA, Peter Bennett OBE said that he is familiar with the issue of deaths from falling objects and said that it is the intention of the APPG on Working at Height to have a future session on this topic.

Lord Mackenzie of Luton noted that he was formerly a minister at the Department for Work and Pensions with responsibility for health and safety and working at height. He said that a major issue during his time as a minister was the liability and responsibility of directors of construction companies. He said that the Government at the time tried to increase the liability but did not make progress and asked speakers for their views on what the current state of this situation was.

Mark Davison said that there needed to be more liability but that trade unions should also empower workers to call for increased health and safety standards.

Chris Stephens drew the question and answer session and the meeting to a close. He thanked the speakers and attendees for their contributions and reminded attendees to keep in touch on the important issues discussed.