

HSENI chief executive Robert Kidd: keeping communications open

Knowing what he did about the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, when Robert Kidd saw the role of its chief executive advertised, he was clear he wanted the job.

In his role as the head of firearms and explosives at the Northern Ireland Department of Justice, he was familiar with the work of the Executive and with people working there. His role, which was a regulatory one, involved legislation, inspection and the licensing of commercial explosives, some of which would be used in mines and quarries. Much of his work was underpinned by health and safety legislation.

As a career public servant, he also knew Keith Morrison, the then chief executive of the HSENI, for whom he says he has “huge respect”, a sentiment widely shared in the health and safety community throughout the island. He explains, he has known Keith Morrison since they had worked together on EU PEACE funded projects some years previously.

Saying the CEO role was publicly advertised in an open competition – and that he did not know who else might have applied for it – he was “delighted to be offered the job”. He took up his post last January.

In an aside during our conversation, when discussing the triangular relationship between the HSENI, the HSA and the HSE-GB, Robert Kidd mentions that the chief executives of the three agencies, Sharon McGuinness in the HSA, and Sarah Albon, who took up the chief executive’s role in the HSE-GB in September, have all been appointed in the past 18 months.

Mental health and wellbeing

Now in office for the best part of a year, what does Robert Kidd see as the health and safety issues of the moment?

There are, he says, the long running traditional issues, such as accidents and injuries in the agricultural, construction and manufacturing industries, which “continue to run”. In the construction industry, falls from height continue to top the list of reported accidents, while in agriculture accidents with animals and machinery are still occurring.

Looking beyond those traditional concerns and looking to the future, Robert Kidd says the HSENI has “identified



Robert Kidd,
Chief Executive, HSENI

mental health and wellbeing” as a major concern. There is, he says, “a huge amount of stress”. Estimates would indicate that approximately 15,000 people in Northern Ireland per annum, report to be suffering from work-related stress. While many organisations offer support, for example in the form of counselling services for those experiencing work-related stress, there is still a challenge to look at how it can be prevented in the first place and effectively manage the factors that underlie it.

To illustrate the scale of poor mental health in general, he quotes figures about suicides in the construction industry. The figures are from the UK national statistics database, which show construction workers are more likely to commit suicide than the general male population. He says the figures show more construction workers die from suicide than from falls from heights.

Referring to the Mates in Mind charity, which addresses the stigma of poor mental health and promotes positive mental health across industry, he says the larger employers have bought into the concept of positive mental health. Managing work-related stress should be a core part of this work.

HSENI is working to build work-related mental health awareness. Good work is being done by the large firms. People are being encouraged to take short courses, which show people the kind of things they need to look for. We want to get the message across that it is ok to say, ‘I am not ok’.

Indeed, HSENI has set up its own internal workforce wellbeing steering group, representative of all the organisation, to allow people to talk about mental health and general wellbeing issues. “We want to improve the workplace”. There was acknowledgement that all need to be invited to contribute, for this work to be effective.

One thing that has pleased him are the findings of the Northern Ireland Civil Service staff attitude survey. The HSENI came out top of the poll for the second year running. This is a position the new chief executive is keen to maintain, acknowledging the value of people as his most critical resource.

Mentioning the work on work-related ill health, being undertaken by Kyle Carrick, a principal inspector with the Executive, and his team, Robert Kidd points out that we should also be focussing on preventing health issues that are caused or compounded by the workplace. HSENI has declared three main occupational health priorities in its corporate plan: occupational cancers, occupational lung disease, with work-related stress sitting alongside musculoskeletal disorders.

Handing over a brochure for the forthcoming Workplace Health Leadership Group Northern Ireland conference, at which he says Claire Kelly, the HSENI’s mental wellbeing at work advisor will be speaking on the topic of tackling workplace stress, he also stressed the need for employers to effectively manage all aspects of work-related ill health. He explained how the conference will provide attendees with important information on why this is critical to their business and how it can be achieved. *(for details about the conference see Noticeboard, pg32)*

Open communications

Like the HSA, which published its Strategy 2018-2023, the HSENI has a strategy, which remains a draft plan because Stormont is not sitting and there is no minister to approve and sign it off. Like the HSA’s strategy, the plan highlights the issues on which the Executive plans to focus attention: safety, health and high-risk activities.

Unlike the HSA’s strategy, which is for a three-year period, the HSENI’s plan spans five years. Given that there are suggestions in the South as to whether the HSA strategy should be for a longer period, Robert Kidd said it is difficult enough to plan for five years (especially in the absence of current political leadership). He said the HSENI at the end of three years carries out a review “to look and see what is emerging”. Many of their strategies will take at least five years to start to show positive results, as messages get communicated and begin to effect change.

As the discussion looks at differences in the way the HSENI and the HSA approach some administrative issues, responding to a query about the HSENI’s policy of publishing minutes of board meetings, Robert Kidd says “We have a very open book policy”, including how we work with our stakeholders.

“Larger employers have bought into the concept of positive mental health”

When it comes to safety campaigns, he mentions the use of social media and gives the example of the forklift truck safety campaign. As the purpose of the campaigns is to keep people safe, he says it is a good idea to forewarn people: “We announce we are coming”. Responding to the suggestion that this lets people prepare, he makes the point: “Creating wider awareness and the need for compliance with legal requirements is the key here, especially for businesses we don’t get to visit due to resources constraints”.

Brexit and co-operation

In mid-October, when we spoke to Robert Kidd, the Brexit outcome was uncertain. What he felt was that whatever the outcome: “We have long had a good relationship with the HSA at all levels” and “I have no doubt that will continue”.

The trilateral agency meetings between the HSENI, the HSEGB and the HSA will continue, he says. He added: “As we (the chief executives) are all relatively new to our posts, it will be an opportunity for us to build relationships as we get to know each other.”

That said, he says, Brexit will present “issues to be dealt with”. There are huge efforts to plan but a lot of what happens will be reactionary. It is “a time to keep communications open”, he says, as the conversation draws to a close.