

Joint Oireachtas Committee – Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Opening Statement by Patricia Byron - Chairperson Health and Safety Authority

25 October 2023

Introduction

Chair and members of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am delighted to attend the Committee as Chairperson of the Health and Safety Authority.

I was formally appointed by the Minister during the summer. To date, I have chaired two meetings of the Board of the Authority and have had detailed induction and briefings from the Authority's Executive on the mandate, strategy and operations. I met with Minister Neale Richmond in September to discuss my role and to review current challenges and opportunities.

I would like to acknowledge former Chairperson Tom Coughlan and his Board, and the Chief Executive and his team, for the work done to grow and develop the Authority into a high performing and engaged agency that delivers on key priorities for Irish society.

Interest and experience

I have worked as a senior executive in the insurance and related financial services sector over many years. I was the first CEO of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, an independent State body, established to reform a costly personal injury claims environment. I am past Chairperson of the Motor Insurers Bureau of Ireland where I led a reform programme focused on business transformation and effectiveness. I currently works as a consultant in the financial services and health sectors. I also serve as a non-executive director on the Board of the Central Bank of Ireland Commission and am Chairperson of the Health Insurance Authority Board.

The Authority

I am learning that the Health and Safety Authority has a very broad mandate:

- Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 the Authority protects the safety and health of workers and people affected by work-related activities.

- Under the chemicals mandate, there is a wide-ranging responsibility to ensure that workers, consumers, the public and the environment are protected from the harmful effects of chemicals.
- The Authority has responsibilities under EU legislation for market surveillance of industrial products and chemicals.
- Finally, the Authority acts as the national accreditation body for Ireland.

The Health and Safety Authority's vision is one of healthy, safe, and productive lives and enterprises. To achieve this vision, the Authority sets out its priorities in three-year strategy statements. The Authority plans its programmes of work and assigns its resources to closely align with and support the Department's Strategy and the overall Programme for Government. The most recent Strategy Statement 2022-2024 commenced in a period of significant change for Irish workplaces as the economy and society emerged from the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Board has recently completed a mid-term review of this Strategy and I am pleased to confirm that it is largely on course to deliver its intended outcomes. I look forward to engaging widely as we work with the Executive throughout 2024 to develop the next Strategy for 2025-2027.

The Authority seeks legal compliance through regulation and enforcement. But already I have been struck by the equal and appropriate emphasis on collaboration, promotion, and influencing to maximise the Authority's contribution to prevention. The Authority effectively leverages stakeholder networks at sectoral, national and EU levels. The tripartite Board of the Authority encourages and facilitates this collaborative approach through its nominating organisations and advisory committees.

As a regulator, it's important to strike the right balance between promotion and enforcement. An inspection is not merely about identifying breaches. I am aware of how the Authority's inspectors engage actively and constructively with employers and workers across all sectors to encourage, foster and promote improvements. This is done by providing verbal and written advice and direction, along with additional supports that are available online. Of course, enforcement action is also undertaken as and when required.

In terms of progress in occupational safety and health, there has been an overall reduction in work-related fatalities in the past 10 years; 2022 had the lowest fatality rate on record since the Authority was established in 1989. However, it cannot be repeated too often that one death is one too many, and I am very conscious that families, colleagues and communities are left devastated due to the lives that continue to be lost due to preventable work-related incidents. The Authority maintains a particular focus on the high-risk sectors of construction, agriculture and health and social care given the high rates of fatal and non-fatal injuries in these sectors. Importantly, the Board of the Authority has dedicated advisory committees to provide guidance and network support to the Board in the construction and agriculture sectors, with a further advisory committee for the health and social care sector being established.

Key issues and the wider environment

Ireland's population now exceeds 5 million. Over 2.5 million persons are in employment. Against the backdrop of an expanding population, a growing workforce, and changing employee expectations in a more blended and digitised working environment, the Authority's role in regulating its various mandates becomes increasingly complex.

Based on the sanction received from DETE in 2021, the Authority has increased staff numbers significantly, including establishing a new Occupational Health division. The Board appreciates that the estimated 2024 funding will support the Authority in its ongoing recruitment process and on-boarding of new staff as well as continuing its organisational restructuring to better deliver on its broad mandate and changing work landscape. However, I am aware that the Authority, like many agencies, is experiencing serious challenges

in terms of recruiting and retaining staff in a full employment market, particularly for specialist technical roles.

To support its increasing workforce and the scope of its activities, the Authority continues to transform its ways of working. There are significant strategic projects underway to introduce new technologies and structures to improve efficiency, planning, data quality and reporting to inform policy and decision-making. The Board is monitoring and supporting these large-scale projects to ensure that strategic benefits are delivered within agreed funding limits. In getting to know the organisation over the past number of months since my appointment, I was heartened to learn of the maturity of the Authority's existing governance and accountability framework, and the multiple sources of assurance available to the Board. I have also been struck by the Authority's ambition to become a truly evidence-based organisation, as I know from my work elsewhere that producing reliable, comparable, up-to-date statistical information is vital for setting policy objectives and to inform appropriate policy measures and preventative actions to better deliver on our vision of healthy, safe and productive lives and enterprises.

As Chairperson I want to support the Authority as it plays a key role to support many new developments in the economy:

- **Regulating in the area of new and sustainable energies** – for example, the Authority is assessing increasing numbers of land use planning requests for hydrogen production planning proposals.
- The Authority is also responding to **increasing chemical production and storage activity** in response to Brexit, the Ukrainian war and climate change.
- **EU Chemical policy** - at European level, as the Central Competent Authority under the Chemicals Act, the Authority is working to influence EU chemical policy on the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability and on the revisions of key chemicals legislation.
- Proactively promoting general awareness of the **benefits of accreditation** to drive new accreditation activity, which is an area I believe has huge potential to improve standards, productivity, and to ensure that Irish companies can be as competitive as possible in the Single Market.
- Expanding the Authority's expertise and capacity to address **work-related psychosocial risk** issues such as bullying, stress, violence and aggression, and safety and health issues associated with the **gig economy** and **digital labour platforms**.

Concluding remarks

Finally, I would like to thank the Committee once again for the invitation to meet with you today, and I look forward to bringing value to the Authority and to working with Minister Richmond, and his officials in the Department, during my time as Chairperson. Together with the Board, I will support and challenge the Authority as it meets internal and external challenges.

Go raibh maith agaibh.