

Enabling a Better Working Britain

An Assessment of
Work Related
Ill-Health in the UK
Waste and
Recycling Sector



Recycling
centre



The Client

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

The Problem

Work related sickness absence is credited with costing the UK economy around 30 million working days every year, at a financial cost of around £1.5 billion per year, according to Dame Carol Black's 2008 report "Working for a Healthier Tomorrow". HSE identified a lack of data quantifying the extent of ill-health in the waste and recycling industry. Therefore HSE commissioned HSL to undertake a detailed survey of sickness absence of the UK waste and recycling sector.

What we did

HSL engaged with the industry to provide sickness absence data. At the core of the work was a detailed statistical analysis of data on worker sickness absence provided by the participants for the year 2007/08, which was used to calculate a range of sickness absence statistics for different categories, for example, the average number of absences and days absent per employee per year, the average length of absence, and the percentage of absences attributable to specific categories of illness. Statistical techniques were then used to identify major trends in the data. Results were assessed for significance taking into account limitations of the data.

Outcome/Benefits

For the local authorities participating, analysis of sickness absence data found the average number of days absent per employee per year to be 12.8 days, compared to 7.0 days in the private companies. Rates of sickness absence attributable to musculo-skeletal disorders were particularly high across all work activities. These results were broadly consistent with more general surveys from Local Government Employers and Engineering Employers' Federation.

However, the HSL survey identified a number of inconsistencies in how sickness absence is recorded across the waste industry and because of this was not able to provide an accurate breakdown of the profile of ill-health, i.e. the specific reasons for sickness absences, across specific work activities.

Therefore, one of the key recommendations stemming from the work was for the industry-wide adoption of a standard for recording sickness absence. In response to this, the Waste Industry Safety and Health (WISH) Forum, with the involvement of HSE and HSL, agreed an industry-wide uptake of a standard set of metrics for recording sickness absence.

The implementation of these new metrics will provide the industry and HSE with accurate intelligence on specific job activities in the waste industry where the risks of work-related ill-health are highest, allowing the effective targeting of effort and resource to effectively address the problem.

