

North York Moors National Park Authority Finance, Risk, Audit and Standards Committee

1 February 2021

Health and Safety

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To update Members on health and safety activity so far during 2020/21 and on progress made on the health and safety work programme.

2. Background

- 2.1 This paper is the quarterly update for members to make them aware of the health and safety work undertaken by officers. The paper will also suggest a programme of work for the Health and Safety Group for 2021/22.

3. Sickness Absence

- 3.1 Sickness absence has continued to be significantly lower than normal during this period as illustrated by the figures below;

1 April 2019 – 31 Dec 2019 = 283 days reported
1 April 2020 – 31 Dec 2020 = 131 days reported

- 3.2 Half of the 131 days reported absence have been as a result of one colleague having a longer term illness. This matter is now resolved and the individual concerned has left the Authority.

- 3.3 The Authority's long term target for sickness absence has been 4 days per annum per full time equivalent. The absence rate to the end of December is 1 day per person. It is becoming increasingly clear that being unwell no longer means a binary choice between being at work or not being at work. Many staff are finding that it is relatively easy to continue working at home while suffering from minor ailments. There is clearly a proper balance for a responsible employer to strike here to ensure that staff don't feel under pressure to continue working when unwell. As working away from the office is likely to be part of the long term working pattern for many staff, consideration of how to properly deal with sickness absence will form part of the work programme for the coming year.

4. Accidents and Near Misses 2019/20

- 4.1 Since the writing of the last report, accidents and near misses have continued to be reported but at significantly lower levels than previously. Having said that, there have been two incidents which members should be made aware of;

- 4.2 **Tow Bar Failure** – A Maintenance Ranger collected digger from site at Goathland to bring back to Danby. While driving at slow speed, the trailer began behaving erratically and the driver pulled over. On investigation, it was found that the main towbar housing bar had snapped, but the trailer was still attached to ball hitch and therefore connected to the vehicle. The vehicle and trailer were safely recovered and the Head of Recreation and Ranger Services undertook an investigation. The full report into the incident is available to members on request, but the conclusions were as follows;

'The towbar appears to have been faulty. The towbar cracked in the heat affected zone which is the weakest part of a weld. Some surface corrosion is visible in the photos but not sufficient to penetrate or weaken the metal.

A1 Towbars (the supplier of the towbar) have gone into liquidation since this towbar was purchased. It is not reasonable to expect employees to identify this sort of defect – it is unlikely that this particular fault could have been spotted prior to the accident by anyone other than an expert. Routine checks involve the safety critical and moving parts of the towing mechanism.'

The vehicle involved (Ford Ranger) was less than 5 years old and its servicing was fully up to date. The trailer is stored inside and is also serviced regularly. The towbar was not fitted by the manufacturer and it is not clear why a towbar wasn't specified as part of the vehicle purchase. The supplier of the towbar cannot be pursued as they are no longer trading. The report concluded that in future towbars should be specified at the point of purchasing vehicles and the supplying dealer should fit the equipment. Advice is also being sought from the Authority's insurers about any further checks that might reasonably be carried out on towbars when vehicles are serviced.

- 4.3 **Injury from flying debris** - an apprentice supervisor was working with a group of apprentices to carry out vegetation clearance on the Cleveland Way near Helmsley. The brushcutter was fitted with a metal grass cutting blade and a guard. Pre use checks had been carried out. The operator was using the brushcutter when something was propelled upwards from the ground and hit him in the lower right side area of his torso. He switched off the brushcutter and found a wound. The task was immediately cancelled and the operator taken to hospital where he needed minor surgery to remove stone fragments. He returned to work after 3 days absence but was on light duties for 2 weeks. The accident was reported to the Health and Safety Executive as required, but there has been no subsequent contact from the HSE.

The Head of Recreation and Ranger Services investigated the incident and the following is an extract from her report (full document available on request). 'The brushcutter was correctly fitted with a guard which is designed to prevent objects being propelled toward the operator. One of the risk control measures for this work is to walk the area prior to starting and removing any objects that could cause injury such as metal or glass. However, in rough vegetation it is not always easy to see such items and certainly not easy to see stones; nor would it be practical to attempt to remove all stones before starting work.

When cutting rough vegetation, it is good practice to use the cutter an inch or two above the ground, in order that the blade is clear of the ground and any stones, and also that the cut is as close as possible for efficiency. It is not always possible to be sure of exactly where the ground level is under thick or rough vegetation and this is what likely caused the blade to come into contact with the stone. It is probable that this affected the angle of the cutter to allow sufficient clearance for the stone to be propelled by the blade towards the operator.'

The work undertaken is very common as is the use of a brushcutter and the incident is unusual. No evidence could be found of similar accidents occurring in the UK. Staff have been reminded of the need to ensure that the correct tool for the task is selected and that the ground should be walked prior to work starting.

- 4.4 Members will recall the reports to the last two meetings which detailed the actions taken as a result of a wheel coming off a trailer in an incident earlier in 2020. The action plan produced as a result of the investigation into this was included in the last report and the various actions are being met. Officers can give further details if required.

4.5 The 3 incidents mentioned in the above paragraphs are all unrelated, but officers took the view that all could have had serious consequences. The Chief Executive met with the Director of Park Services and Head of Corporate Services to discuss the matter. While there is no evidence of negligence or sloppy work practices, it was deemed appropriate to remind colleagues that they should take the time to work safely, stop work if there are any safety concerns and for managers to ensure that sufficient time is built into work programmes for kit to be properly maintained. The Head of Recreation and Ranger Services reminded her team of their personal responsibilities to report defective equipment (no matter how minor the defect) and to take responsibility for ensuring that kit is taken out of service until it is repaired.

5. **Covid-19**

5.1 Members have seen the actions taken by the Authority in relation to the latest c-19 restrictions. These seem to be working well and, other than where closure is required by law, the Authority's work is continuing. Officers are mindful that the Health and Safety Executive are making 'no-notice' visits to employers in this area to ensure full and proper compliance. While there are no concerns about the Authority's practices, it does emphasise the need to be vigilant in ensuring that working practices remain fully compliant with the law.

5.2 The two most significant issues for staff to deal with in the current lockdown are;

- For those with younger children, dealing with home education, looking after children and working as well as possible can cause difficulties. Individual managers have spoken with their team members in this position and have agreed temporary bespoke working patterns to allow colleagues to properly balance their family and work commitments.
- After 10 months of restrictions and with the latest law changes coming in the darkest, coldest months of the year, trying to maintain mental health and a positive outlook are also very important. Managers are talking to their staff regularly, offering support and informal networks amongst staff are also proving to be invaluable. The Authority's Mental Health First Aiders have been encouraged to develop a number of new initiatives and further details of these will be given at the meeting. External support is also available for staff via Health Assured and the Department for Work and Pensions' Able Futures initiative.

5.3 A small number of staff have contracted the virus. In each case, so far, this has been through out of work contacts. All have recovered quickly with no complications.

6. **2020/21 Action Plan and Draft Plan for 2021/22**

6.1 The annual health and safety action plan was approved by Members in July and, not surprisingly, Covid-19 related actions have dominated health and safety work this year, although good progress has been made in other areas as well. Officers are keen that the actions originally planned for 2020/21 are carried over into 2021/22.

6.2 Therefore Officers' initial thoughts are that the action plan for the coming year should include;

- Assess Corporate Health and Safety Performance using the LGA matrix and take actions as appropriate by 31 May.
- Assess the effectiveness of volunteer Task Day Leader (TDL) training by; organising regular meetings of TDLs with health & safety as an agenda item; regular spot checking of activities which are led by TDLs; develop by 31 May and implement a timetable for the above 2 activities.
- Develop a formal register of relevant health and safety legislation and stating briefly how the Authority is complying with it by 31 December.

- Consider how to properly manage sickness absence in the context of a long term change in working pattern. Revised policy to be in place by 31 December.
- Reinvigorate the process of spot checking with formal targets for Directors to cascade through their Departments and regular updates on progress at monthly SLT meetings. System back in place by 30 April.
- Mental Health First Aiders to continue work throughout the year on a series of initiatives designed to support mental health. Work programme for this to be put in place by 1 April.
- The incoming Head of Recreation and Rangers Services to review and, if necessary, update the written practices for maintaining machinery reported to members in November 2020. Report to be made to November FRASC.

6.3 Members' views on these or any other items they feel should be included are very welcome.

7. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

7.1 There are no significant additional financial or staff issues related to the contents of this report. Budgetary provision is sufficient to pay for all appropriate Health and Safety training and personal protective equipment.

8. **Recommendation**

8.1 That Members;

- Comment on the proposed Health and Safety Action Plan for 2020/21; and
- Note the work undertaken since the last FRASC meeting.

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Background documents to this report

NPA Reports, December 2013-20
 FRASC Reports 2012-20209
 2020 Accident Investigation reports available on request

File ref.