

NORTHERN IRELAND WORKFORCE CENTRE OF HEALTH AND SAFETY SHAKE-UP

Leading lawyers have given full support to moves which could improve the safety of workers in Northern Ireland.

A new workplace health strategy, developed by the Occupational Health Forum for Northern Ireland to improve health and safety in the workplace, has been hailed as a step in the right direction by lawyers acting for injured workers.

Belfast-based solicitor Robert Martin, Northern Ireland's representative for the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL), said workplace safety must be top priority on any employer's agenda.

"APIL members have first-hand experience of the horrors of workplace accidents," commented Robert. "This is a positive move to shake up health and safety at work and we welcome any initiative to make Northern Ireland's workplaces safer."

APIL believes it will be possible to create a safer working environment in Northern Ireland, provided employers, employees, lawyers, insurers and health and safety organisations work together.

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“Without doubt the situation will take time to improve,” said Robert, “but with proper research to find out why accidents happen and how those accidents can be prevented in the future, it can be achieved.”

While supporting the forum’s proposals, APIL believes its initiatives can be pushed forward a step further to address workplace deaths as well as accidents. The association suggests the forum’s ‘action plan’ should be developed after the following have been carried out:

- Current levels of occupational health support in Northern Ireland assessed and areas for improvement identified
- Models for the provision of support services available elsewhere are examined and their potential use in Northern Ireland assessed
- A feasibility study to be carried out to identify cost-effective mechanisms for an occupational health support service

“It is vitally important that any moves are backed-up by thorough homework, so that improvements are effective,” said Robert. “It is also essential that employers understand risks before they can begin to implement methods of prevention.”

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APIL says education across all levels – from boardroom to shop floor - is crucial, and compulsory training programmes should be in place for employers and employees. The organisation is also calling for thorough inspections to be carried out to ensure employers comply with workplace regulations already in place to protect staff.

“If all employers complied with rules and regulations designed to cover health and safety we would probably see fewer accidents,” said Robert. “But there are those employers who ignore them and get away with it. Tighter controls need to be implemented so this doesn’t happen.

“Everyone has the right to go to work and come home again unharmed and we applaud any efforts to make Northern Ireland’s workplaces safer,” concluded Robert. “Any new measures must, however, be tough enough and strict enough to make employers sit up and take notice.”

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