

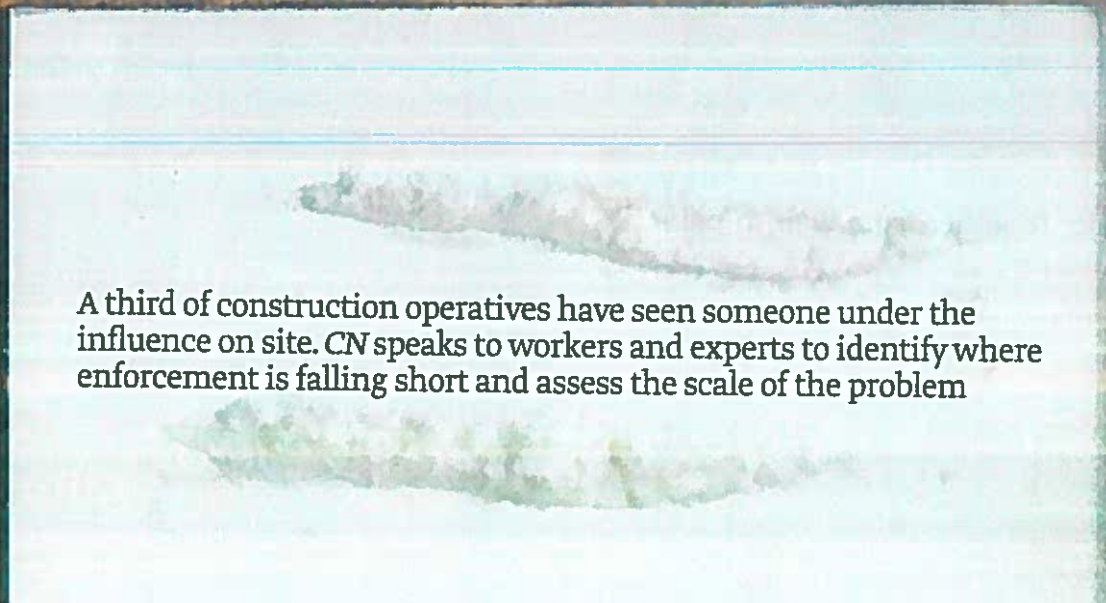
What's



happening



on your site?



A third of construction operatives have seen someone under the influence on site. *CN* speaks to workers and experts to identify where enforcement is falling short and assess the scale of the problem



HEALTH & SAFETY
LUCY ALDERSON

More than a third of construction workers have witnessed a colleague under the influence of drugs or alcohol on site.

This was among the key findings of research conducted by the Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS) in 2016, as part of a report containing a number of equally concerning figures.

Around 65 per cent of workers had never been tested for drugs and alcohol, while a quarter said they were tired at work because of the effects of drugs or alcohol.

Despite these worrying statistics, there is a significant lack of wider research available to support industry efforts to understand and – importantly – monitor the workforce's relationship with drinking and drugs.

General research was conducted back in 2004 into the prevalence of illegal drugs in all workplaces by Cardiff University on behalf of the Health and Safety Executive. It found that one in 10 workers of all ages had used drugs within the past year, which rose to one in three among workers aged under 30.

Although construction was identified as a “higher-risk” industry in which the effects of drug use could carry “far more serious” consequences, there was no specific research relating to the sector in the report – which itself is now 14 years old.

Indeed, following a CN Freedom of Information request submitted in August last year, the HSE said it was unable to provide any information on the number of

“The vast majority of companies now have policies and procedures in place, which they didn't used to”

EDWARD HARDY, CCS

onsite accidents in which drugs and alcohol could have been a contributory factor.

Given this glaring lack of benchmarking data, are contractors able to effectively monitor the issue and track attempts to tackle any problems?

Scale of the problem

CCS chief executive Edward Hardy says the only information it has been able to gather about the use of drugs and alcohol in the industry comes from its 2016 research.

He says the prevalence of both was identified as a concern by the CCS – particularly with regards to the number of workers who had witnessed colleagues under the influence.

Paul Jackson, who is head of impairment research at innovation centre The Future of Transport, suggests the lack of data illustrates that drugs and alcohol in construction is an “under-represented issue” and could be a “much greater problem than is recognised”.

The Future of Transport aims to support improvements to transport systems. Dr Jackson leads on researching the impact that fatigue, stress, alcohol, drugs and mental health difficulties can have on worker performance – including those in construction.

From his research and experience, he suggests construction workers could be using drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication for site injuries and musculoskeletal issues, the latter of which are particularly prevalent in the sector.

Between 2014 and 2017, 3.5 per cent of the industry's workforce suffered from a medical condition they believe was caused or made worse by their work, according to the HSE. Musculoskeletal disorders accounted for 65 per cent of these cases.

“We know that musculoskeletal disorders are much more prevalent in construction,” Dr Jackson says. “The nature of the work is more likely to cause an increased prevalence in back injuries, neck injuries, shoulder pains [...] and chronic pain

“What was most disturbing is that they didn't think drinking over lunch and then working was an issue”

CN RESEARCH RESPONDENT

problems. While I'm not sure there is documentary evidence to support the idea that people are using [drugs and alcohol] as a form of self-medication [...] anecdotally, I think this is very much the case.”

How is it monitored?

Drugs and alcohol policies vary between different companies and sub-sectors within the industry.

For example, it is a criminal offence for workers to carry out safety-critical works on a railway under the influence of drugs and alcohol, under Section 27 of the Transport and Works Act 1992. It is also an offence for employers to fail to carry out all due diligence to prevent workers from carrying out works under the influence.

Charles Russells Speechly's partner Steven Carey says that, while there is no law that says construction companies working on rail projects must carry out drugs and alcohol tests on their employees, it is “prudent to do so” to avoid potential liability under this act.

A person found guilty of this offence could find themselves in prison for up to six months and/or handed a fine of up to £5,000, he explains. “It is sensible to include at the very least a drugs and alcohol policy, and potentially a drugs and alcohol testing policy, in order to prove that you have attempted to prevent a drugs/alcohol offence.”

Accordingly, major clients such as HS2 and Network Rail instigate regular drugs and alcohol testing.

Both carry out tests when a worker is suspected of being under the influence, or after a health and safety incident has taken place. Both conduct random testing across their projects as well.

Throughout the wider industry, Mr Hardy suggests there has been a general increase in the monitoring of drugs and alcohol. “The vast majority of companies now have policies and procedures in place for dealing with [it], which they didn't used to,” he says.

Of the 6,000 sites, companies and suppliers registered with the CCS, Mr Hardy says it is “rare” for the CCS to come across a company that does not have drugs and alcohol guidelines in place. He says larger construction companies typically have “very strict and thorough policies”, such as carrying out random drug tests on site.

But while the industry may have become more rigorous in its approach to regulation and enforcement over recent years, CN research indicates a culture of drinking and drug-taking still lingers within the industry.

One director of health and safety at a major contractor, who wishes to remain anonymous, says 10 per cent of the drug tests the company conducts are failed.

These failed checks typically come back with a positive result for cannabis, he says, pointing out that these tests are usually targeted to catch workers already suspected of being under the influence.

Knowledge about issues within the industry is limited, the health and safety director suggests. “Most reputable contractors are doing something about drugs and alcohol,” he says. “But all we as contractors know about drugs and alcohol comes only from our testing companies.”

First-hand accounts

Dozens of construction workers have also given CN their accounts of drug-taking and excessive regular alcohol consumption being normalised in the industry.

One worker, who has been in the industry for more than 50 years, said the use of cocaine by younger workers in particular has increased over the past three to four years in rural parts of Wales, where he works.

He argues that drug use is

Analysis: Drugs and alcohol

constructionnews.co.uk/analysis

► “10 times a bigger problem” than alcohol in the industry. “There’s always been a problem with drink,” he says.

“But most of the lads I know in construction in some way or other are over-indulging in drugs. It used to be cannabis, but its cocaine mostly now.”

He recently witnessed three people being told to leave site because they had failed their test. “I would say test failures are more drug-related than alcohol-related now,” he says. “A lot of middle management are engaging with drugs as well.”

Another worker says he has witnessed workers under the influence on every site he’s worked on, while another recalls seeing colleagues operating heavy machinery after smoking cannabis on site.

The head of a construction department at a higher education body tells *CN* there is an increasing drug-taking culture among the younger generation of construction workers.

He adds that there have been three occasions when he has had to ask students to leave workshops because they were under the influence of alcohol.

“What was most disturbing is that they didn’t think drinking over their lunch break and then working in that environment was an issue,” he says.

Can enforcement improve?

Only robust annual data can provide a fuller understanding of drugs and alcohol use in construction, but for now such statistics do not exist.

Another way it could be tracked is by analysing the number of accidents or dangerous incidents in which alcohol or drugs were a contributing factor.

CN’s Freedom of Information request submitted in August last year led to the following response for the HSE: “The Health and Safety Executive’s systems do not code incidents in a way that allows records to be retrieved in relation to whether drugs and alcohol has been a contributing factor in an accident that has taken place on a site.”



One worker tells *CN* they believe drug use is a faster-growing problem than alcohol

However, the anonymous health and safety director claims the HSE does not even ask contractors for this information in the first place. The issue is “not on the HSE’s radar”, he suggests, adding that it “doesn’t really have a handle” on the situation.

“But if there is a fatality on site or something really serious has happened, the question that ought to be asked is whether anyone involved was under the influence of a substance,” he adds.

CN has contacted the HSE for a response to the allegations.

Dr Jackson points to another

“The HSE does not code incidents [...] in relation to whether drugs and alcohol has been a contributing factor”

HSE STATEMENT

shortcoming in regulations and enforcement: the reliability of workplace testing kits.

“(Whether) the way companies are monitoring drugs and alcohol through random testing is effective is debatable,” he says.

Dr Jackson adds that one challenge “hasn’t even been considered yet”: the rise of new psychoactive substances in the market, sometimes known as legal highs.

“Will those tests detect a synthetic new psychoactive substance? Possibly not,” he says.

Companies’ influence

As well as using drugs and alcohol to self-medicate physical ailments, Dr Jackson suggests workers may be doing the same for mental health problems.

CN research in July this year revealed the scale of the challenge in construction, with 57 per cent of the workforce reporting that they had experienced mental health issues, while one in four respondents said they had

“Are people using drugs and alcohol to cope, or is the use of drugs and alcohol causing mental health issues?”

PAUL JACKSON,
THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORT

contemplated suicide.

“It’s a chicken and egg situation,” Dr Jackson says. “Are people using drugs and alcohol to help them cope with mental health issues, or is the use of drugs and alcohol causing mental health issues? It’s a really complex issue.”

He is currently developing a wellbeing programme with the aim of getting companies to recognise the impact they as a business can have on the mental health of employees.

Many companies have put education programmes in place to help employees adopt healthier lifestyles and reduce drug use and drinking.

However, these programmes rarely look at the effects of shift patterns on employees, Dr Jackson adds, or the demands that a company’s operational practices place on individuals, which may trigger mental health issues.

“The key message here is that it’s all very well to deal with the consequences, but if you’re not addressing the underlying cause, then you’re just putting a sticking plaster on a major wound,” he says.

Based on Dr Jackson’s observations, coupled with workers’ responses to *CN*’s research, drugs and alcohol could be a bigger problem than some companies currently think.

But with such a significant lack of data on the scale of drug and alcohol abuse, it is difficult to accurately assess the situation – or to judge how effectively the industry is tackling problems where they exist.

What do you think?

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Construction: Under the influence?

The UK's alcohol consumption is declining – but is construction following suit? In the absence of hard data, *Binyamin Ali* investigates the industry's drinking culture and discovers what companies are doing to change it



HEALTH & SAFETY
BINYAMIN ALI

Alcohol consumption in the UK is going down.

Awareness campaigns led by charities and the NHS, along with a growing acceptance across society that a balanced diet leads to a healthier lifestyle, have all played a part.

The latest data from the Office for National Statistics found that in 2016, 56.9 per cent of the people surveyed drank alcohol in the week before they were questioned by the ONS. This figure represents a 7.3 per cent decline on 2005, when the percentage stood at 64.2 per cent (see graph, p34).

The ONS also found that the proportion of people stating that they do not drink alcohol at all increased from 18.8 per cent to 20.9 per cent over the same period.

When it comes to construction's relationship with alcohol, however, there is little historical data available to help understand the trend. The Health and Safety Executive, for example, does not monitor whether alcohol was a contributory factor in a reported injury or fatality.

A 2016 Considerate Constructors Scheme survey sought to shed some light on the issue, but this looked at the prevalence of both drugs and alcohol within the industry, making it difficult to apply the findings to discussions solely around alcohol.

The lack of data and research begs the question: what sort of drinking culture does the construction industry have?

'You followed the dirty feet'
"It goes back years that most construction workers like to have a beer after work, especially on a

Friday," says Mark Collison, operations manager at utilities specialist Vision Survey. "When I started in 1997, I was on a site where there was a pub next door and a high percentage of people would go and have a beer at lunchtime, and they would be there after work every night."

Having entered the industry as a trainee surveyor in the late 1990s, Mr Collison says drinking during

"People are being asked to work longer under more stress, so when they leave work [...] they have a short timescale in which to unwind"

MICHELLE RICE, O'KEEFE

the day doesn't happen anymore because workers would not be allowed back on site. However, you are still likely to see "pubs around the sites in the evening and certainly on a Friday [that have] guys in there straight from [...] finishing their shifts," he adds.

McGee director John McGee adds that the drinking culture after work "isn't as severe as it used to be", and reiterates Mr Collison's observation about drinking during the day.

"There is a zero lunchtime drinking culture," Mr McGee says. "When was the last time you walked into a bar in London during the working day and saw somebody in a hard hat having a pint? You won't see any. Thirty years ago, they would have been queueing up at the bar."

McGee director of health and safety John Hennessy adds: "All you had to do was follow the dirty feet."



“It doesn’t necessarily correlate that just because somebody has not passed an alcohol test on a Monday that they have mental health issues, but certainly it would be a flag and an indication”

MICHELLE RICE, O’KEEFE

ONS figures show that as of 2016, 29 million people in the UK drank alcohol – just under half of the population. Of these, 7.8m (26.8 per cent) said they drank heavily.

Given that drinking continues to be very much a part of Britain’s

social fabric, the pub remains an obvious choice of venue for teams working together on site to socialise after their shifts.

“You spend a lot of your time with the same people or as part of a gang, so you tend to forge quite a good bond with them,” Mr Collison says. “My background is obviously surveying, but you’ll end up working with steel erectors and cladding fixers – at the end of the week you go and have a beer because you form this bond.”

Understanding the causes

To prevent health risks, the NHS recommends drinking no more than 14 units per week (a bottle-and-a-half of wine or five pints of lager), spread across three or more days.

When the job takes people away from home and requires them to stay at a hotel, however, workers can become more likely to exceed these guidelines. With

few places to go beyond the site and their hotel room, “people’s socialising or relaxation time happens in a bar or a pub”, says O’Keefe health and safety lead Michelle Rice.

Another trigger that can lead to increased consumption is the number of hours people are asked to work, and the amount of pressure they are placed under.

“Industry programmes are becoming tougher and more ambitious in terms of the timescales that people have to complete buildings,” Ms Rice says. “People are being asked to work longer hours and to work under more stress, so the reality is when they leave work [...] they have a very short timescale in which to unwind and let go of the day.”

This reduction in leisure time can lead to some workers drinking more to speed up the process of unwinding, Ms Rice suggests, given alcohol’s popularity as a

relaxant. And if someone does fail an alcohol test on site, this should not simply be the start of a disciplinary process, she argues.

“One of the things that I’ve stipulated, and we’ll be doing going forward, is anyone who is conducting a drug and alcohol test, I believe should be a mental health first aider. It’s a natural point at which to start the conversation,” she says. “It doesn’t necessarily correlate that just because somebody has not passed an alcohol test on a Monday that they have mental health issues, but certainly it would be a flag and an indication.”

Both Ms Rice and Mr Collison agree that the industry has taken significant strides with regards to mental health awareness, but add that the link between alcohol and mental health is not appreciated as much as it ought to be. “I think we’re aware of it,” Mr Collison says. “It’s easy to link the two, ▶

ONS ON DRINK

56.9% of ONS survey respondents had consumed alcohol the week before the interview. This was down from...

7.3% from the same figures in 2015

20.9% of ONS survey respondents said they did not drink alcohol at all, which was up from 18.8 per cent in 2005

Analysis: Alcohol

constructionnews.co.uk/analysis

“If somebody went out and overdid it, we’re not going to give them a hard time. We’d rather they didn’t come into work and we’d probably congratulate them for not coming in”

JOHN MCGEE, MCGEE

▶ but I don’t think enough is being done to confirm that.”

Ms Rice believes this is the main reason people who conduct drugs and alcohol tests should be mental health first aiders, adding that the time has come to “treat them in a multifaceted way”.

What companies can do

With so many potential factors behind the amount of alcohol a worker may drink, does this place more responsibility on the shoulders of employers to monitor these triggers?

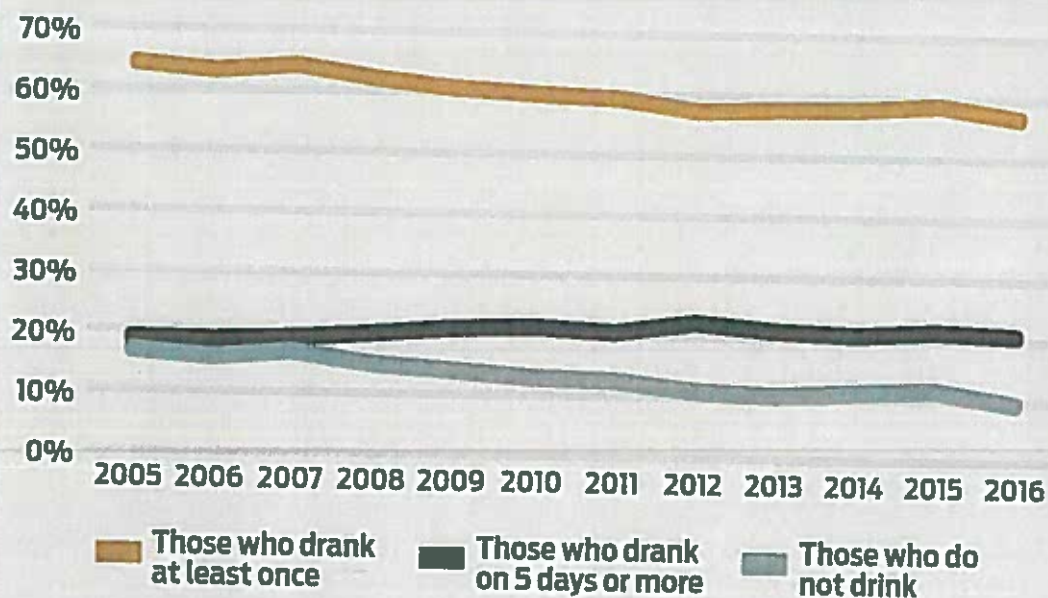
Mr Collison believes so. Taking the example of someone who is working on a job that requires them to stay in a hotel, he suggests it can be useful to be aware of what people are eating and drinking.

“You can’t dictate what people can and can’t eat,” he says. “[But] because they claim back their food and drink on expenses, they have to submit a receipt – and we can gauge that. If they have gone into the pub and spent their allotted money on a bag of chips and 10 pints, then obviously it’s different to having a meal and one pint.”

If companies notice any unhealthy trends regarding a worker’s drinking or eating habits, Mr Collison suggests discussing whether the hotel’s location is stopping them from finding alternative places to eat, or offering guidance on healthy eating habits.

Ms Rice argues that employers have a fine line to walk here. While they will not want to be

UK DRINKING HABITS, 2005-16 RESPONDENTS’ DRINKING IN THE PREVIOUS WEEK



perceived as some kind of “nanny state” by their workers, support and guidance is still essential. “It’s probably more to do with us as an industry, looking at the pressures we’re putting on people,” she says.

“Because if you have limited time, you will reach for junk food. If you have limited time to try to relax from your day, you’re more likely to use something to speed that up, which might well be alcohol. There are triggers that we know could actually encourage people to do more of the stuff you wouldn’t want them doing.”

Mr McGee and Mr Hennessy add that, while employers should seek to monitor these triggers, they must not lose sight of their duty to have a robust deterrence policy in place.

“HS2 is a good example, it’s excellent what they’re doing,” Mr Hennessy says. “It doesn’t matter what your task is, whether you’re safety critical or not: if you’re going to get a pass to work on an HS2 project, you have to have a medical. And part of your induction is a drugs and alcohol test. Even if you’re visiting the site, you’d have to do a drugs and alcohol test.”

Mr McGee adds that, although workers may look to get around this by making sure they are not

under the influence during their induction, random tests are also used to offset this.

“If somebody is over the limit at work, they could be sacked and they are out of a job,” he says. “This is not playground stuff; this is, ‘You will not turn up to work over the limit or else there will be very serious conversations.’”

True cultural picture

The repercussions of failing an alcohol test are undoubtedly high, and employers are increasingly aware of the risks both to them and their workforce of operatives being under the influence.

However, McGee’s Mr Hennessy suggests that companies should avoid adopting an overly puritanical approach to how workers conduct their social lives.

“If somebody went out and they overdid it, we’re not going to give them a hard time the next day,” he says. “We’d rather they didn’t come into work and if anything, we’d probably congratulate them for not coming in. We accept that people go to christenings and social functions.”

On the key question of whether there is too much drinking in the sector, Mr McGee believes industry workers are as aware as anyone else of the potential harm alcohol

can do – and the wider benefits of healthy diets.

“You see it on site, they all bring in their own tupperware boxes with salad and they’re eating fruits,” he says. “There isn’t a single café on our sites that cooks an English breakfast.”

Ms Rice, however, says the question is “difficult to answer”. Many industry-specific factors, such as tight deadlines and high-pressure projects, “might actually encourage people to drink more”, she adds.

With the lack of robust research making it difficult to gauge exactly how much industry workers drink, the picture of construction’s relationship with alcohol remains incomplete.

However, awareness of the dangers among construction firms is growing, reflected in the conversations being had, the changes to worker inductions, and the random tests being conducted on more and more sites.

This openness represents a critical step towards understanding and improving the industry’s drinking culture.

CN: Best practice pieces
A range of best practice articles
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