

Smoking at Work

The problem of smoking at work falls into two distinct categories - fire risks and health risks - with a growing emphasis on the risk to health from passive smoking, or exposure to environmental tobacco smoke.

There are situations where smoking is banned in areas of the printing, paper and board industry because of the use of highly flammable materials, food packaging requirements or quality requirements. Action due to health risks from passive smoking is less clear cut.

The HSE leaflet "Passive Smoking at Work" recommends that all employers should introduce a policy to control smoking in the workplace, following full consultation with their employees, and gives advice on what the policy should cover.

GPMU Cancer Policy

The GPMU Policy on Occupational Cancer calls for cancer prevention programmes to reduce all possible exposures to cancer causing agents in the working environment. It argues that workplace cancers play a significant part in the overall incidence of cancer, and that the workplace is an area where action should be taken to deal with the problem.

Now it is recognised that cigarette smoke can cause cancer, the policy dictates that the GPMU should be pressing employers to take action to eliminate or reduce this risk.

Employers' Duties

Employers are under both criminal and common law duties to protect employees' health and to ensure a safe working environment.

Under the Workplace Regs, employers have a duty to provide rest rooms and rest areas, which protect non-smokers from discomfort caused by tobacco smoke.

Enforcement under the Health and Safety at Work Act might also be used to make employers remove tobacco fumes.

Employers are expected by the courts to be aware of developing knowledge, such as that on passive smoking, and not be too slow in applying it. It should also be noted that employers have a high duty of care to individuals, such as asthmatics, who are likely to be more susceptible to environmental tobacco smoke. It is for this reason that many employers are now seeking to introduce smoking restrictions to redress passive smoking.

Executive Council Policy

The Executive Council broadly supports moves to introduce smoking restrictions in the workplace and action that will reduce health risks at work, but will not generally support a total ban on smoking, or policies which seek to impose unreasonable requirements. A total ban, for instance, could lead to illicit smoking and create additional fire risks.

The emphasis should not be on whether people smoke but where they smoke. There are a number of alternative

approaches to restrictive smoking in the workplace. The method adopted will often depend on the size and nature of the workplace, and the number of smokers and non-smokers involved.

Essential Principles

For this reason the GPMU is not attempting to lay down a detailed policy, but where employers' smoking policies exist, or are proposed, they should be based on the following principles:-

- they must be in writing
- they must be fully discussed and agreed with the employees concerned before they are adopted
- after agreement they should provide a three-month lead-in period to help smokers adjust to the new policy
- they must be based on the principle that non-smokers are given a right to smoke-free air
- while accepting the rights of non-smokers, the policy must be fair in attempting to meet the needs and wishes of smokers
- they must not involve an absolute ban on smoking and provide for at least one area, with air extraction, where smoking is permitted
- they should provide help to those individuals who want to stop smoking.