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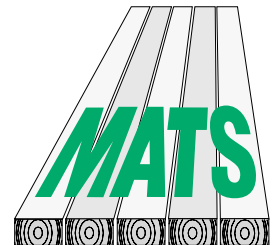
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# Uncommon ground

**The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) met the incredulous mumblings of 150 disgruntled UK crane industry members at the Construction Plant-hire Association's (CPA) crane interest group annual meeting last month when it attempted to clarify UK crane hire rules to CPA members. C&A was present for an afternoon of heated debate.**

Following a brief introduction by Martin Ainscough, joint-owner of Ainscough Crane Hire and chairman of the CPA crane interest group, Mike Sarson, one of three members of the HSE team scheduled to audit UK crane hire companies in the coming weeks, took the stand.



*Colin Wood, director and chief executive of the Construction Plant-hire Association.*



*Question time at the CPA crane interest group annual meeting with its chairman Martin Ainscough, also joint-owner of Ainscough Crane Hire.*

At the top of the agenda were the actions to be taken on the acceptance of straight crane hire jobs, rather than contract lifts, and to clarify both the legal position and that of the HSE.

Temperatures first began to rise when Mr Sarson began to explain the HSE's standpoint of leaving the decision to the crane hirer's common sense.

It was clear that most crane hirers were expecting the HSE to lay down simple, strict requirements, rather than placing the decision on the shoulders of the crane hirers.

Initially, Mr Sarson was keen to point out that a significant number of crane hire companies are clearly getting to grips with the agreed CPA rules on crane hire versus contract lifts, and that there has been a significant improvement in recent years.

The subject then turned to straight crane hire and how hirers are supposed to assess a potential customer's ability to manage a lift. "Hirers should carry out a 'realistic' assessment of the customer's ability to provide a 'competent' person to supervise the job," said Mr Sarson. "Hire desk staff should be more sceptical. Is the company requesting the crane well-known? Is it a company that is likely to be a regular crane user and therefore know what is involved?" In essence, Mr Sarson expected hirers to be tough on callers who were completely unknown, or who were unlikely to be regular crane users.

He also said that if a dangerous situation exists when the crane arrives on site, such as close overhead cables, the driver should take immediate action. "He should stand up and report to the office," he said. If, on the other hand, an operator completes a straightforward lift but reports the chaotic organisation when he returns, this should also be recorded and a tougher line taken if, or when, the customer returns for a subsequent lift.



*Mike Sarson of the Health and Safety Executive.*

"In essence," said Mr Sarson, "the HSE's view is that hiring one time in good faith is acceptable, but if the customer returns, we expect a firmer line to be taken."

The HSE's position was then met with a barrage of questions and comments. One key point that arose from this session was that crane companies should ensure in writing that operators know precisely when, and under what circumstances, they must report back to the office, rather than continue with a lift when they have doubts over the planning. Mr Sarson confirmed that this would reduce crane hire companies liability in such circumstances.

When asked if the HSE should simply insist that crane hire companies be obliged to demand a written risk assessment and details of competent person, he replied that the HSE did not consider it practical to demand that everything be

put in writing. "Better a well-planned and supervised lift, the details of which have been given verbally to the operator, than a poor written one," he said. "With many of these questions there is no right answer," said Mr Sarson. "The HSE is looking to see if hirers are fulfilling the letter and the spirit of the law. Our suspicion is that some CPA members are not meeting the minimum standards. At this stage it is the minimum standards that the HSE is looking to achieve."



*Peter Hird informs an attentive crowd of the new Contract Lifting Services Conditions which replace the existing Contract Lift Conditions.*

What was clear by the close of the meeting was that the UK's crane hire companies were looking for the HSE to effectively police their industry by being highly prescriptive with the rules governing crane hire. The HSE on the other hand are restricted in this regard and are more concerned that the "best practice measures" are adopted by all hirers. The HSE does seem to be trying to ensure that any demands they make are practical and not overly bureaucratic.

The highly competitive nature of the UK crane hire industry though and, in some cases, lack of discipline, causes anger and frustration when those companies that genuinely aim for improved safety and strict adherence to best practices, lose business to less diligent crane hirers. The problem would appear though to lie less with the HSE and more with the industry itself.

The HSE could, however, be clearer when reporting accidents and aim to prevent legal action, or at least work with the judiciary when a crane hire company has clearly followed best practice guidelines. This might help ensure that good companies are protected, while bad ones are not.

Other subjects discussed at this year's meeting included an update on the new STGO rules for cranes, the escorting of abnormal loads in the UK, the national CPCS standard for appointed persons, the new insurance rules that come into force for 2005 and the Construction Industry Training Board's (CITB) new crane engineering apprentice scheme. These subjects are covered in further detail, along with the full question and answer session at this year's CPA crane interest group meeting, on vertikol.net at <http://www.vertikal.net/en/stories.php?id=1076>



*More than 150 UK crane industry members attended this year's CPA crane interest group annual meeting to seek clarification from the HSE.*



*Jim Maccall of the Construction Industry Training Board.*