



Fiona Ewing

NATIONAL SAFETY DIRECTOR,
FOREST INDUSTRY SAFETY COUNCIL

What is your background?

I'm a Scot, born in Edinburgh. For the last nine years I've lived in New Plymouth with my husband, two daughters and a large German Shepherd. I'm originally a townie and moved out to the country when I was eight. My first degree is in agriculture.

Describe your current employment

I'm leading FISC's work to improve health and safety in the plantation forest industry. Set up last October, the council includes representatives of government, industry and workers. The job is about implementing change and improving the overall safety maturity of the industry. On a day-to-day basis it can involve business improvement, cat herding, change management, and talking about safety to anyone who'll listen – from government ministers to forestry workers.

Why did you become involved in health & safety?

I was recruited by the Health & Safety Executive when I was working in agriculture and food research in England. They offered me a job back in Edinburgh – no competition really! I'm interested in how businesses work and how to make them better. H&S is an opportunity to improve your business because it goes right across your operations and is a great way to bring people together from all parts of your organisation.

What training have you had for the role?

I have a postgraduate diploma from Aston University in the UK, ongoing professional development, management training and communication skills. I also have 30 years' experience across what appear to be very different industries. But it's all about working with, and looking after, people.

What has been your most satisfying OHS achievement?

Seeing the light bulb go on and things starting to change. I also enjoy working on topics at a sector level to influence change more broadly. In the UK I was involved in projects on scaffolding and setting up a national house builders' forum where builders could collaborate on construction issues. Here I've been involved in work to improve public safety in the electrical supply industry and to create common competencies. I didn't manage to solve the last one before I left my previous role, but the foundation work is in place and others will take it forward.

What's the hardest thing you've had to do in OHS?

Investigate fatalities, one in particular where a child was fatally injured in a farmyard when run over by a reversing tractor and trailer. That's why my view of prosecution is a bit different. There's nothing the courts can do to these people that they haven't already put

themselves through and will continue to suffer. Let's learn from these incidents and use them to influence change and improvements overall.

What has surprised you about working in OHS?

I'm constantly surprised by the focus on compliance with legislation, rather than understanding the risks to your business and the people who work for you and then working out the best controls to put in place. I'm surprised by the focus on systems and paperwork, rather than engagement with the people who actually do the job.

How has being in OHS changed you?

My role has morphed from compliance to mentoring and business improvement. As a young inspector I would often take action on a particular risk resulting in a single point solution, which had limited success. Now I look at the whole ecosystem and try to understand why something is being done in a certain way. I have more patience – my family might not agree – and spend more time listening and understanding other people's perspectives.

What advice would you give anyone thinking of entering the field?

It's a fascinating area to work in. Remember it's all about people, good communication and good risk management.

What is the most risky thing you've done?

Probably working on a farm when I was younger – lots of exposure to vehicles, unguarded machinery and large livestock. I also ride pillion on a Triumph Tiger 1050 (Toby Triumph) where my only contribution is to move my head minimally when cornering by gazing over my husband's opposite shoulder. Once you get over the complete lack of control it's a great way to see the New Zealand countryside – and electricity networks and forestry sites too!