
Balfour Beatty hit with Â£500,000 HAVS fine

Description

Balfour Beatty Utility Solutions has been fined Â£500,000 and ordered to pay another Â£195,000 in costs after it was found that its workers were exposed to hand-arm vibration over a nine-year period.

Sheffield Crown Court heard that workers were regularly put at risk of developing Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) between 2002 and 2011, while operating hand-held power tools such as hydraulic breakers and floor saws.

An investigation by the HSE found the company failed in its legal duty to ensure the risks to workers who used these tools was kept to as low a level as reasonably practicable.

Balfour Beatty Utility Solutions was also found to have failed to assess the risk to workers' health, failed to put in place and monitor suitable risk control measures and failed to put in place a suitable system of health surveillance.

The company also failed to report to the enforcing authorities a significant number of cases of employees diagnosed with HAVS as was legally required. Balfour Beatty Utility Solutions pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2 (1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, as well as to a breach of the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995.

Speaking after the hearing, HSE inspector Christine Mellor said: "This case was about failing to protect workers. Exposure to hand-arm vibration is a well-known risk which Balfour Beatty Utility Solutions failed to adequately control.

"The company failed to heed warnings. Early health surveillance detected ill health but still this was not acted upon to prevent on-going exposure.

"This is a particularly serious case because of the extent and duration of failures. The breaches were repeated over several years and this resulted in persistent poor compliance."

HAVS is a permanent condition affecting the nerves and blood vessels of the hand. It can cause pain, tingling and numbness, making it difficult to carry out everyday tasks such as gripping and lifting objects, fastening buttons and zips, using a knife and fork or using a tooth brush. In some cases, the hands can have a continuous feeling of wearing mittens and hobbies such as fishing or gardening become impossible to do. Symptoms are often worse in winter when it's cold. The condition can render a worker disabled, affecting their chances of employment.

A spokesperson for Balfour Beatty said: "The shortcomings in processes identified in this case took place many years ago and were addressed prior to the start of the investigation by the HSE. The judge acknowledged both this and that there was no evidence of anyone coming to harm as a result.

“Balfour Beatty takes its responsibilities both for health and safety extremely seriously.”

CATEGORY

1. United Kingdom

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