

# Setting the record straight

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## A focus on health and safety is crucial to improving public perceptions of the industry and attracting new recruits, says Dave Mitchell

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There is no doubt that the housebuilding industry today puts health and safety at the very top of its priority list. But as we look forward, and increase our capacity and output, we cannot afford to be complacent.

Over the past two years or so we have seen big increases in output across the industry. This is a result of increased demand, driven by the UK government's Help to Buy scheme and an improving economy and mortgage market generally – if buyers can buy, builders can build.

Latest figures show around 155,000 homes were built in England in 2014/15, a 25% year-on-year increase and up from around 110,000 just a few years ago – the steepest rise in output for 40 years. We are, however, still some way from delivering the 200,000-plus homes that the government wants to see built and that the country needs.

### Top priority

With the pressure on for further increases in supply, it must not be forgotten that housebuilders are responsible not only for the health, safety and welfare of employees, including direct, subcontracted, casual or part-time workers, but also the people who purchase their homes, their neighbours and any other members of the public affected by any operation to do with the building process.

These responsibilities are taken very seriously. Health and safety is now an embedded measure of performance and of how successfully the company is being run. Effective health and safety has become part of the culture, something everyone at every level buys into.

While the industry today has a very good record, we are always looking at ways to improve. And as volumes increase and along with them inevitable pressures on labour supply, materials, quality and customer service, the industry will require a clear commitment and focus.

Site work is planned to design out risks. Every aspect of the construction process is assessed and a plan developed to ensure it is safe. Where any risk remains, then the process is managed throughout, with information on how that risk will be managed communicated to all people involved.

### Training

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Having the appropriate people trained to the required level for each part of the process is essential and is a key part of the planning. Today's industry spends a huge amount of time and money to ensure risk is minimised, and there has been a sea change in the approach to safety in recent decades that is reflected in the statistics we see today.

Unfortunately, the public perception of health and safety on building and construction sites does not always reflect the good work that goes on.

If I think back to the building sites when I first joined the industry it is clear why negative perceptions developed. But we have come a long way and need to work to ensure people are aware of those improvements and develop a more positive perception. As we look to attract into the industry the tens of thousands of people a year we will need to deliver sustained increases in supply, creating that more positive impression is vital. We need to be showcasing today's industry to as many people as we can so we can attract the very best and brightest young people.

The Home Builders Federation (HBF) has recently launched a [website](#) aimed at demonstrating to young people the range of exciting careers in housebuilding.

Changing perceptions and ensuring we continue to prioritise health and safety will be central to our ability to convince them to join the industry.

The HBF health and safety forum meets on a quarterly basis and provides a platform from which we can drive change. Its purpose is to raise standards and provide best practice guidance and support to the industry.

Its charter, which members commit to being part of, aims to deliver further improvement in the performance of the sector and is backed by an annual action plan looking at key focus areas.

As we look to attract more people into our businesses and grow the capacity to deliver more of the high-quality homes the country needs, driving improvements and ensuring we are focused on health and safety has never been more important.

**Dave Mitchell is Technical Director at the [Home Builders Federation](#)**

### **Further information**

- Related competencies include [Health and Safety](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building Control Journal* February/March 2016