

HSE inspector Jennifer French talks gender bias on International Women's Day



HSE inspector Jennifer French supporting IWD2022

Jennifer French has been as HSE inspector for over seven years. She works in the Field Operations Division, the largest operational inspectorate in HSE, which covers many employment sectors including agriculture, general manufacturing, engineering, food and drink, entertainment, education, health services, local and central government and domestic gas safety. To mark International Women's Day 2022, Jen shares some of her experiences of encountering gender bias when she's been out on site visits and what she loves about her job.

"I graduated with a degree in German, but didn't know what I wanted to be. Then I came across this job as an HSE inspector which looked interesting and it's been the best thing I ever did.

"Being a health and safety inspector at HSE means having a lot of regular contact with people in all different types of industries, but the vast majority, such as engineering or construction, are male-dominated. As a woman it can be quite intimidating at first to approach a business full of men unannounced and make yourself heard. It is quite striking how often I am talked over or referred to as 'love' or 'dear' or, at times, just simply ignored.

"At one point I was acting as a coach to a new (male) trainee inspector. During inspections I was often leading and he would be quietly observing. Frequently I'd ask a duty holder a question and they would turn to my trainee and answer him instead. It sounds like such a cliché, it's almost laughable, but sadly it highlights that gender bias and assumptions still exist.

"I have been called a 'piece of skirt' to my face on site visits and been

referred to in email correspondence as 'Jen, the health and safety bird'. A quick riposte and a roll of the eyes, all done with a smile, is usually enough to make it quite clear that I won't stand for it and it usually get easier from there. Nonetheless, it's disappointing that women can still face such comments in the workplace. One of my favourite things about being an inspector is having the chance to challenge gender stereotypes on a daily basis.

"As well as being an Inspector, I am also the co-chair of HSE's Gender Equality Network and am proud of the fact that 55% of inspectors in Field Operations Division are women. We work every day to make workplaces safe and reduce ill health, injury and death."