



Guardians of Mine Safety

150 Years of Check Inspectors in Coal

Celebrating a safety milestone

May 2026 marks 150 years since worker-elected safety Check Inspectors were legislated in the NSW coal industry. Check Inspectors are the longest continuous form of legislated, worker-elected safety representation in the world; and they remain a vital part of the safety framework across the NSW and Queensland coal mining industries.

Coal Check Inspectors were born in the toughest of circumstances. Throughout the 19th century, work in the emerging Newcastle-Hunter Valley coal industry was physically demanding, hazardous and often life threatening.

Inspired by the worker-elected 'Check Inspectors' in coal mining in Britain, the pioneering Unions of the Hunter Valley advocated for the adoption of this system in Australia. On 11 May 1876, NSW became the second jurisdiction in the world to adopt the Check Inspector model in the Coal Mines Regulation Act.

Check Inspectors were experienced coal miners who were elected by their workmates to act as a safety authority on their behalf. Critically, Check Inspectors were ultimately bestowed with the power to stop work

if they deemed it to be unsafe. Though rarely used, this power increased worker's confidence to speak up about safety and ensured that worker's voices were considered regarding safety in their workplace.

The NSW approach spread across Australia from the 1890s, with similar provisions adopted in Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, often driven by union campaigns and major incidents. While the coal industries in NSW and Queensland have retained the full system of independent Check Inspectors, these arrangements in other sectors and jurisdictions have been diluted by subsequent workplace health and safety reforms.

As the coal industry expanded, developed and professionalised so too did the role of Check Inspectors.

Today, Industry Safety and Health Representatives remain central to coal mine safety, providing independent oversight across sites, mentoring site representatives, investigating serious hazards and, where necessary, directing work to cease.

Join us in recognising the contributions of Check Inspectors to our industry and celebrate the oldest continuous worker-elected safety system in the world.

What is a Check Inspector?

A Check Inspector, also known as a 'Checkie', is a worker-elected safety representative, empowered under legislation in the NSW and Queensland coal industries. Now referred to as Site Safety and Health Representatives (SSHRs) and Industry Safety and Health Representatives (ISHRs), they provide workers with a statutory 'voice' to identify hazards, inspect mines and protect health and safety.

SSHRs at the worksite and ISHRs at the state level are elected by mineworkers through union-run democratic ballots. They are experienced mineworkers who typically have accredited training and advanced qualifications. SSHRs retain their core responsibilities as employees of their job site, while also focusing on day-to-day hazard management. ISHRs are full-time safety inspectors directly employed by the Union to provide oversight, mentoring, and independent intervention.

ISHRs have the power to enter and inspect mines and review safety systems and documents. They investigate incidents and hazards and are able to recommend changes to policy or practice to minimise and avoid incidents. They represent workers in safety matters, and in the most serious cases, can issue notices or direct the suspension of unsafe work.

Check Inspectors differ from WHS representatives in other industries, such as HSRs, as they cover entire sites and not just work groups, and typically have specialist qualifications and training in high-hazard risks. Importantly, they also possess stronger regulatory powers, including the power to stop unsafe work, and operate within a two-tier system unique to the mining industry.



“ I found that becoming an SSHR gave me the chance and the opportunity to have a more formal role and be able to speak up and be a voice for the workers on site. ”

Tracey D'Amico
Open Cut SSHR



Our day can change fairly quickly. I could plan to do an inspection at either an underground, open cut or a prep plant. Then I could get a call that there's been an incident, say, a dangerous incident at any one of those operations. Depending on the information and the severity of the incident, I'd go to that site and conduct my own investigation. We'd get notified of all incidents from the mines; that's a requirement under legislation, so we are always reviewing that incident information. We're on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ”

Steve Tranter
Northern Mining and NSW Energy District ISHR

About the ‘Guardians of Mine Safety’ Report

The Guardians of Mine Safety report was written by Professor Michael Quinlan from the University of NSW, Dr Heather Jackson from the University of Newcastle, Professor David Walters from Cardiff University, and ex-OHS inspector David Brandie. It was commissioned by the Mining and Energy Union to examine the role of industry-level safety and health representatives and consider whether ISHRs and SSHRs should be reintroduced to the metalliferous industry in NSW.

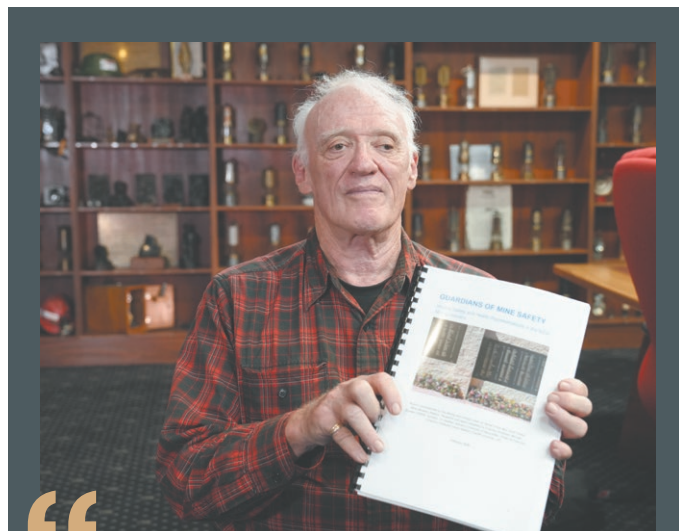
The Guardians of Mine Safety report, based on historical research, safety data and focus group research with mineworkers; shows that ISHRs and SSHRs have a demonstrable impact on mine safety in NSW. Evidence shows stronger safety outcomes where this system operates compared to sites relying only on weaker representation like the HSR model.

The ISHR system present in NSW and QLD coal mining is described as the ‘world’s best practice’, with representatives complementing government inspectors in identifying and eliminating hazards. In contrast, metalliferous mining shows weaker safety performance, higher amounts of serious injuries, and poorer hazard management. This coincides with the removal of site and district-level check inspectors from metalliferous mining in NSW as part of the harmonisation of NSW work health and safety legislation – not due to any evidence of their ineffectiveness.

In a number of interviews, workers at sites without strong safety representation reported fear of victimisation, limited consultation on safety-related matters, and unresolved hazards – some of which persisted for years. In contrast, on sites where ISHRs and SSHRs provide independent oversight, workers reported a reduced fear of raising issues coupled with improved engagement with regulators and management.

In examining the data in NSW, the report finds that over 90 percent of ISHR inspections identify potentially fatal hazards, and that their active review of safety management systems and their investigation of incidents ensure corrective action. This means that systematic safety failures are often identified before they escalate, preventing the serious injury or death of workers.

Additionally, the report found that, while used sparingly, the power to halt unsafe work is upheld by regulators – confirming that interventions are used responsibly and



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Metalliferous mining was described by people in it, as well as those who’d worked in it and were now in coal mining, as cowboy operations. ‘Target on your back’ and ‘cowboys’ were the two phrases that were repeated.

There was a perception that if you raise an issue, you may find yourself in difficulty. You may get dismissed. A lot of the systems were not working as they should have been in those (metalliferous) mines.”

Michael Quinlan
lead author of the Guardians of Mine Safety report

effectively. It also found that the ISHR model improves incident reporting, risk assessment quality, and hazard control implementation.

Finally, it has been found that ISHR involvement often resolves issues simply through their presence or escalation pathway, without the need for formal enforcement. By combining independent oversight, technical expertise and strong legal powers, ISHRs and SSHRs improve hazard identification, strengthen compliance, and reduce serious injury and fatalities compared to systems of limited worker representation.

Key recommendations of *Guardians of Mine Safety*

Guardians of Mine Safety makes the case for strengthening worker's safety representation in NSW mining, particularly through reinstating and enhancing the check inspector system in the metalliferous mining industry.

The report compiles significant evidence showing that current arrangements that rely mainly on HSRs are deficient, with workers isolated and safety issues unresolved. Introducing ISHRs and SSHRs as independent representatives who are able to intervene without fear of employer retaliation is critical to improving safety outcomes in the growing metalliferous mining sector. As ISHRs are employed by the Union, not the mine operator or mines regulator, workers and Site Safety and Health Representatives are able to escalate concerns to them without fear of reprisal, or of institutional capture.

The report also calls for expanded, mine-specific training for SSHRs and HSRs, tailored to major hazards at their specific site. Ongoing training to build expertise, confidence and effectiveness should be emphasised. The ISHR led training and mentoring is a key strength of the system in coal and should be extended.

Additionally, Guardians of Mine Safety highlights a strong cost-benefit case for the introduction of ISHRs and SSHRs to the NSW metalliferous mining industry. With serious injury claims exceeding \$120,000, and fatalities exceeding \$5 million, preventing even a single fatality or a few serious injuries would outweigh the cost of employing ISHRs.

Finally, the introduction of ISHRs and SSHRs would work to reduce the climate of fear identified in workplaces that lack strong safety representation. ISHRs and SSHRs increase confidence by providing independent support, escalation pathways and protection for speaking up. This is linked to better trust, stronger reporting and more effective collaboration with regulators.

A second report completed by the research team examines mine safety frameworks in Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania and recommends the re-establishment of check inspectors in metalliferous mining in Western Australia and Tasmania (it has been retained in Queensland); and in coal mining beyond NSW and Queensland.

What next?

As we celebrate 150 years of worker-elected check inspectors in the coal industry, we urge the NSW Government to reintroduce statutory worker-elected SSHRs and ISHRs into the metalliferous mining industry.

The metalliferous mining industry exhibits many of the same characteristics that continue to justify the creation of coal-specific representative roles, including high risk involving heavy mobile plant and explosives; geotechnical instability and confined spaces; 24-hour operations; extensive use of contractors and labour hire and production pressure.

This sensible reform can be enacted by amending the Work Health and Safety (Mines and Petroleum Sites) Act 2013 (NSW). As recent serious events and fatalities show; and as we look to expand critical minerals and transition metals mining in NSW; there is no time to waste in strengthening the safety framework in NSW mining.

