APPG - Asbestos in Schools – the need for action

Summary and Recommendations in Brief

The recommendations set out in the **APPG Asbestos in Schools – the need for action** booklet form the basis for a long term solution to the problem of asbestos in schools.

In the short term there must be a policy of openness and transparency. Parents, teachers and support staff should be informed and updated annually on the presence of asbestos and the plans to manage the asbestos in their schools.

Standards in asbestos training should be set. Training should be tailored to a person's role and should be properly funded and mandatory.

Initially data should be collected on the presence of asbestos in UK schools through the Property Data Survey Programme.

The data should be used to assess the condition of the asbestos in UK schools and to identify the asbestos in the most dangerous condition.

Proportionate resources should be allocated to allow for the removal of the most dangerous asbestos and the continued management of any remaining asbestos in UK schools.

As schools are special workplaces containing large numbers of children known to be more vulnerable to asbestos the Health & Safety Executive should proactively inspect them.

Data on asbestos management could be collected through proactive HSE inspections. The data could be used to inform a national strategic plan for the phased removal of asbestos from UK schools.

In the medium term and as new technologies develop an environmental asbestos fibre level should be set for schools. Research should be commissioned into the development of a system of wide spread air sampling in schools.

In the long term a programme for phased removal of asbestos from all schools should be adopted with priority being given to those schools where the asbestos is in the most dangerous or damaged condition.

Background

Britain has the highest mesothelioma incidence in the world, at more than twice that of France, Germany or the USA.

The incidence of mesothelioma in Britain has increased year on year and is presently 38.4 cases per million of the population per annum. Twice as many people die from the consequence of asbestos exposure in Britain than are killed on the roads.

More than 75 per cent of Britain's state schools contain asbestos. Much of that is badly maintained, meaning that children and staff are at risk of exposure to this killer fibre.

Over 140 school teachers have died from mesothelioma in the past ten years. An unknown number of cleaners, administration staff and caretakers have also died.

The number of children who have died as a result of exposure to asbestos while at school is unknown. It is estimated that up to 300 people a year could die from their asbestos exposure as a child as a result of attending schools containing asbestos during the 1960s and 1970s.

UK Government policy is that, so long as asbestos is in good condition and is not likely to be disturbed, it is better to manage it for the remaining life of the school rather than remove it.

Although some schools and local authorities have effective systems of asbestos management, many do not.

HSE Inspections carried out over the last five years have found flaws in asbestos management in a number of schools that have required advice and enforcement action to be taken. Recent HSE surveys resulted in enforcement action in almost one quarter of the schools inspected.

A report by the Asbestos Consultants Association, ATAC, concluded that the systems of asbestos management in many schools are ineffective and at times dangerous.

They stated: "These are not minor problems that have crept in over recent years; rather they are fundamental problems that are endemic in schools in the UK."

Asbestos in schools is often not in good condition, or it is unsealed and hidden.

Tests have also shown it can be disturbed by normal school activity and asbestos fibres released over the course of many years without anyone being aware.

While we cannot do anything about past exposure, we can try to prevent any more children and staff dying as a result of exposure to asbestos in schools.

Why a Policy of openness

Most people are not aware of the presence and dangers of asbestos in schools and what measures should be taken to prevent asbestos fibre release. It is vital that those likely to disturb asbestos in schools are informed of its presence and know how the asbestos will be managed in the school. Without this information there is increased potential for unnecessary accidental exposure even in a person's normal daily school activities.

Why Mandatory Asbestos Training

Without properly funded mandatory training it is inevitable that there will be a wide range of competency across those expected to be responsible for asbestos management in UK schools. Competency in asbestos management is essential if good standards of asbestos management are to be achieved and maintained.

It is also important to ensure, through mandatory training, that those liable to disturb asbestos in the course of their daily activities have the appropriate asbestos awareness training. Such training would play an important role in prevention of accidental exposure; including exposure by pupils.

Relevant officials in local authorities and school governors, particularly those in academies and free schools need to be trained so that they are aware of their legal responsibilities and the level of resources needed to manage the asbestos in their schools.

In October 2013 the Department for Education (DfE) published on-line basic asbestos awareness guidance for schools. However, it is not mandatory and has not therefore been effectively cascaded to all those that need to access it.

Why an audit of the extent, type and condition of asbestos in UK schools

There are approximately 28,950 schools in Britain, more than 75 per cent are estimated to contain asbestos.

The materials of greatest concern are those that readily release asbestos fibres such as asbestos lagging, sprayed asbestos and asbestos insulating board (AIB), all of which are present in schools. Asbestos was also sprayed on ceilings and structural beams or used extensively in the construction of schools in walls, ceilings, heating baffles, window and door surrounds, with much of it in locations that are vulnerable to damage by children.

We do not know, because there has never been a survey, the extent, type of condition of asbestos in UK schools. However the Schools Capital Review published in April 2011 stated that "Significant parts of the school estate were and are in an unacceptable state." According to the Chief Executive of the Government's Partnership for Schools, "80 per cent of the school stock was beyond its shelf life", and a Financial Times report quoted DfE estimates of an £8.5bn backlog of repairs.

Through an ongoing Property Data Survey Programme (PDSP) of schools the government is collecting information about the condition of UK schools to enable proper financial forecasts to be set for future school buildings and their maintenance. Asbestos has inexplicably been excluded from the PDSP.

The PDSP should be extended and information collected about asbestos in schools; otherwise any financial forecast will be meaningless and there will be a complete failure to adequately resource future asbestos management in schools.

Why HSE inspections are important

In March 2011 the government announced that it would no longer undertake proactive inspections in "low risk" workplaces. Local authority schools were classified as low risk. Schools are not low risk when potentially 300 people per year will die as a result of their exposure to asbestos in school.

HSE proactive inspections would identify those schools that are failing to manage their asbestos and ensure that standards are brought up to an acceptable level.

The information collected by HSE would also help to provide wider intelligence about the success of current government policy.

Why set an Environmental Level for Schools

In 1983 the Department for Education considered a proposal for an 'environmental' limit specifically for schools, given that teachers and pupils could be breathing in raised levels of asbestos for six or seven hours per day. It recommended that, because of the particular vulnerability of children, a level 1/100th of the workplace control levels would not be unreasonable in schools. An environmental level has never been introduced, and instead workplace control levels are still applied to classrooms.

In the UK schools the standards of asbestos management are controlled by generic Regulations and Approved Codes of Conduct; designed for all workplaces. The Regulations were mainly drafted for the protection of adults working with asbestos.

The Control Limit

HSE admit that "The Control Limit is not a 'safe' level and work activities involving asbestos should be designed to be as far below the Control Limit as possible."

The Clearance Level

Following work on asbestos, or a release of asbestos fibres in a school, staff and pupils are allowed back in the classroom when the airborne asbestos fibre levels are below what is known as the Clearance Level.

At the Clearance Level occupants will inhale 6,000 fibres an hour.

The Clearance Level is not suitable for schools as schools contain large numbers of vulnerable children.

Many schools simply do not know the levels of asbestos fibres that people in their buildings are exposed to. The real risk from asbestos in schools is therefore unknown.

A system of widespread air sampling in schools would identify those schools and rooms where asbestos fibres are being released. It would also provide updated data on fibre levels in schools so that a more accurate assessment of the risks to staff and pupils could be made.

Phased Removal

Other Countries have recognised the problem of asbestos in public buildings and have committed to a national strategic long-term policy of phased removal.

There should be a UK national strategic approach to the problem of asbestos in public buildings; with schools acknowledged as a priority because they contain large numbers of children known to be more at risk.

If the UK does not take this action then asbestos will remain a problem in schools indefinitely. It will be a continual, and growing, drain on resources as the asbestos containing materials in the fabric of many UK schools continues to deteriorate. There will be the ever-present potential for the asbestos to be disturbed and fibres released and staff and pupils will continue to die as a result of exposure to asbestos in UK schools.

End.