

Many thousands of staff and pupils could be at risk as a significant number of local authorities and schools fail to show that they manage their asbestos safely.

On the 21st September the HSE published its report into compliance with asbestos guidance in system built schools.^[1]

The guidance was first issued by the HSE and the Department for Education in 2006 following the discovery in a system built school in Wales that dangerous levels of asbestos fibres were released when the walls and structural columns were hit, the doors slammed and even when people sat on the window sills. The guidance advised on the urgent measures to be taken to prevent the fibres being ejected into the classrooms, corridors and halls.

Although the HSE press release asserts that the majority of local authorities are complying with the guidance it gives details that show a significant number are not managing their asbestos effectively, with a quarter of the authorities inspected requiring enforcement action to be taken by the issuing of 18 Improvement notices.

One of the authorities was also served with a Prohibition notice as there was an immediate risk of serious personal injury. A further 32 authorities need ongoing advice to ensure that their asbestos management is effective. Two local authorities had not complied with the guidance to seal cracks to prevent the release of asbestos fibres. This means that thousands of staff and children in those schools could potentially have been at risk.

These findings confirm the concerns of the Asbestos in schools group that a significant proportion of schools are not managing their asbestos effectively. In February a report was published by the asbestos consultants association ATaC of their inspections of a sample number of schools which found serious flaws in asbestos management. Their report reflected what their members find in many schools up and down the country, as the chairman of ATaC 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."*^[2]

The HSE inspections have identified a lack of training and asbestos awareness. This reflects the findings of a survey carried out by the teaching trade union Voice where less than a quarter of the responses stated that staff had received asbestos training in their schools.^[3] Other problems have been identified in the schools that show that a significant number of local authorities and schools are not managing their asbestos effectively.

The HSE and Department of Education questionnaire and inspections has concentrated on one particular asbestos problem in one type of school building.^[4]

The questionnaire gained no information on independent schools and 95% of diocese, who are in the main the owners of the Voluntary Aided Schools, simply failed to reply.

There is potentially a serious problem of asbestos fibre release in system built schools. The problem was first discovered in 1987 in a System built school in Wandsworth when dangerous levels of

^[1] Majority of local authorities satisfy asbestos management rules in 'system build' schools Tuesday, September 21, 2010 . <http://news.hse.gov.uk/>

^[2] Follow this link to [See the report](#)

^[3] See the survey: http://www.voicetheunion.org.uk/index.cfm/page/_sections.contentdetail.cfm/cid/1752/navid/570/parentid/330

^[4] See an analysis of the questionnaire <http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/pdfnewslinks/DCSF%20QUESTIONNAIRE%20TIMESCALE%2014%20Nov%2009.pdf>

asbestos fibres were ejected into the rooms when a door was slammed or a wall hit. A warning was not issued and nothing was done to prevent the fibres being released in the other 13,000 System built schools in the country.

Almost twenty years passed until 2006 when the problem was “re-discovered” in a System built school in Wales when it was found that dangerous levels of asbestos fibres were released when the walls and structural columns were hit, the doors slammed and even when people sat on the window sills. Warnings and guidance were finally issued.^[5] It is therefore unacceptable that twenty three years after the problems were first discovered that a significant number of schools and local authorities have failed to prove that they have taken adequate measures to ensure that asbestos is being properly managed so as to protect their staff and children from the dangers of asbestos.

Since 2006 the HSE has made various attempts to determine whether schools and local authorities were complying with their guidance. Three of the assessments, including this latest one, have been questionnaires that have asked if the local authorities are complying with the asbestos guidance and the law. Not surprisingly the majority of the responses have been positive, for if you ask someone if they are complying with the law it is most unlikely that they will tick the box that says “no.”^[6] The HSE only inspected those authorities who gave unsatisfactory responses to the questionnaire. Therefore the majority of local authorities were not inspected, and the vast majority of schools were not either.

Despite its limitations this report highlights that many schools and a number of local authorities do not appear to be safely managing their asbestos and underlines the need for all the schools and authorities in the country that are not adequately protecting their occupants from the dangers of asbestos must be identified and then brought up to a safe standard.

Before the election the Government recognised that measures have to be taken to improve the asbestos management in schools and had established a Steering Group under the Department for Education to recommend practical measures so that this can be achieved. The Coalition Government has not yet confirmed that the Steering Group will continue. This report shows that it is essential that it does.

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^[5] For a full analysis of the problem see [Release of asbestos fibres in System Built schools part 1](#) [Release of asbestos fibres in System Built schools part 2](#)

^[6] For details see: [Determining the scale of the problem in System Built Schools](#)