

Call for national audit of the asbestos in our schools

JUAC (Joint Union Asbestos Committee)* has called on the Westminster Government to follow the lead of the Welsh Government and order a national audit of the asbestos in UK schools.

Wales' Education Minister Leighton Andrews has asked all local authorities in Wales for reassurances about the asbestos in their schools following a call for a national audit after Cwmcarn High School in the county of Caerphilly closed unexpectedly due to concerns about the safety of asbestos in their buildings.

The Westminster Government claims to be working with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to make sure asbestos is managed properly by schools, yet HSE will no longer proactively inspect UK schools.

JUAC continues to campaign for a national audit of the extent, type and condition of asbestos in UK schools and for a risk assessment of the standards of asbestos management. Only then can the UK Government allocate **proportionate** resources and target those schools most at risk. The long-term aim is the phased removal of all asbestos from UK schools and colleges.

JUAC Chair Julie Winn said: “The confirmation from David Laws, the Minister of State for Schools, <https://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departentalinformation/ministerialteam/laws> that the UK Government will not implement an audit of asbestos in schools is totally unacceptable. This incident in Wales demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the Government’s policy to manage asbestos in schools instead of getting it removed.”

Under the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, schools must maintain and regularly update an asbestos register with the location and condition of asbestos-containing materials in the school.

Julie Winn said: “In the absence of the HSE carrying out inspections we fear that children’s and teachers’ safety is being jeopardised in relying on local authorities and individual schools to assess and maintain the condition of this deadly mineral in our schools. It is time the Government made a commitment to carrying out a national audit of the asbestos in our schools”

Over 75 per cent of Britain’s state schools contain asbestos, according to the ***Asbestos in Schools: the need for action*** report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Occupational Safety and Health. The report reveals that much of the asbestos is badly maintained, meaning that children and staff are exposed to this killer fibre.

More than 140 school teachers have died from mesothelioma (a cancer that is almost exclusively caused by exposure to asbestos) in the past ten years. An unknown number of cleaners, administrative staff, caretakers, cooks and dinner ladies have also died. The number of children who have been killed by exposure to asbestos at school is unknown, but in the US it was estimated that for every one teacher who dies, nine former pupils will die in adulthood from their exposure as a child., In the UK that would mean that more than 100 people are dying every year as a result of asbestos exposure when they were at school.

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***JUAC** is a trade union campaigning committee comprising the six main education unions: Association of School and College Leaders; Association of Teachers and Lecturers; National Association of Head Teachers; NASUWT; National Union of Teachers; Voice; plus the education sections of Unite, UNISON, UCATT and the GMB: www.juac.org.uk. The Group has the objective of making all UK schools and colleges safe from the dangers of asbestos. All the unions in JUAC are members of the Asbestos in Schools (AIS) campaign.