

News release

Damning New Report Condemns Schools Asbestos Management

A damning report conducted by the Asbestos Training and Consultancy Association (ATAC) is released today (Monday 22nd February), and highlights the failings of schools across the country to protect pupils and staff from deadly asbestos.

ATAC conducted a pilot assessment on schools who volunteered to take part. The report found widespread failings in asbestos management, with some schools having no knowledge of asbestos management at all. The report argues that schools are not complying with their legal duty to manage asbestos, and training surrounding asbestos in schools is poor or non-existent.

The audit report will be handed to the Schools Minister Diana Johnson MP before a meeting with the Asbestos in Schools Group on the 24th February. The report follows a questionnaire carried out by DCSF and HSE in 2009 on local authorities and dioceses, which showed similar flaws in asbestos management. 34 local authorities are now being investigated by HSE, and 16 failed to submit any response.

Around 75% of schools in Britain contain the potentially deadly substance, and there have been cases of both teachers and pupils dying from the fatal disease mesothelioma, contracted from asbestos exposure. Regulations require stringent measures to be taken to effectively manage asbestos. The Government's current policy for schools is to leave the asbestos in place and manage it, rather than remove it, but without the necessary resources many schools are not managing their asbestos effectively or safely.

The Chairman of ATAC, **John O'Sullivan**, said: "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."

The Campaign Against Asbestos in Schools, which has joined forces with ATAC, is pressing for a working group to be set up, risk assessments and management plans to be effectively implemented, and full training to be introduced for teachers and school staff.

Paul Rowen MP, chair of the Campaign Against Asbestos in Schools and Lib Dem Health and Safety spokesperson said: "This report confirms what we already feared about asbestos in schools-it is simply not being dealt with. This is a major risk to both pupils and staff, and we have already seen too many deaths as a result of poor asbestos management. The Government needs to renew their efforts in tackling this problem, and ensure that the training is in place to allow school staff to deal with the problem quickly and safely."

Dave Prentis, General Secretary of **UNISON**, the UK's largest public sector union, said: "Put simply, there is no place in our schools for asbestos. This report adds to the growing body of evidence that asbestos in schools is a health hazard and the Government should take urgent action to have it removed. The safety of students and staff should be paramount. Asbestos claims many lives every year, but it is often many years later that the consequences of exposure become clear. Let's rid our schools of this hidden danger."

Philip Parkin, General Secretary of **Voice**: the union for education professionals, said: "ATAC's audit and our own research reveal that in many schools, staff are not aware of the dangers of asbestos; they do not know where it is and are not involved in its management. Urgent action is required to improve standards of asbestos management, and to create an action plan for asbestos in schools, including: audits, risk assessments,

relevant training and guidance, and for all asbestos to be identified and removed in a phased programme when schools are refurbished.”

Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the **Association of Teachers and Lecturers**, said: “This report by ATaC is further damning evidence that the current policy of managing asbestos in UK schools and colleges is fundamentally flawed. Thousands of teachers, support staff and students in the UK could be putting themselves at risk every day if their school or college contains asbestos. This situation is unacceptable, and ATL calls on the government to stop dithering and change its policy on asbestos in schools and colleges. We call on the Government to authorise a national audit of asbestos in all educational establishments, set up an independent body to monitor and provide advice on asbestos in schools, and to have all asbestos removed from our schools and colleges. The health of our young people and those working in education is far too precious to allow this issue to be swept under the carpet any longer.”

Christine Blower, General Secretary of the **National Union of Teachers** said: "The NUT welcomes this report, the fruits of a long-standing campaign to push forward the measures needed to shed light on the true situation of asbestos in schools. This is not a time for passing the buck. The Government must take action now to eradicate asbestos from all schools. ATAC's survey shows that decisive steps are desperately needed, and this can only emerge from a full audit of educational establishments. The NUT looks forward to working together with the Government and other teachers' organisations to address this serious issue."

Unite said: “Unite the union represents an extremely varied array of people working within the schools environment, for example school support workers and workers carrying out maintenance, refurbishment and construction projects. We are extremely concerned over the results of this report and its findings that asbestos is being poorly managed in schools. Our support workers are being continually placed at risk, and our members carrying out refurbishment and maintenance projects, who are already in a high risk category of exposure to asbestos, are being placed in great danger from ill conceived management plans. Unless a clear policy on handling asbestos in schools is developed the risks will remain and families will continue to be devastated by asbestos related illnesses.”

Chris Keates, General Secretary of **NASUWT** said: “Some local authorities and governing bodies are not taking health and safety issues associated with asbestos seriously enough and are failing to comply with their statutory responsibilities to manage asbestos appropriately. There are no safe levels of exposure to asbestos and a long-term strategy for the complete removal of asbestos from all buildings used for educational purposes should be the goal.”

Martin Ward, Deputy General Secretary of the **Association of School and College Leaders** said: “The problem of asbestos in schools undoubtedly is more serious and widespread than commonly acknowledged. A more comprehensive survey is urgently needed so that headteachers and local authorities clearly understand the scale of the problem and what needs to be done to make sure all pupils and adults working in schools are safe from asbestos.”

Mary Turner, National President of **GMB** said: “GMB has campaigned for many years on all aspects of exposure to asbestos at work. As a former Dinner Lady I am only too well aware of the dangers of asbestos to the children and our members who work in schools. This includes Teaching Assistants, cleaners, caretakers and of course catering staff. GMB joins with the other trade unions in the education sector in calling for the proper management of asbestos in schools. This should include adequate training to identify both the material and its condition, and a record of where it is located. Schools

management need to accept their full responsibility for this and plan for the phased removal of this deadly substance.”

NAHT said: “NAHT wishes to express its concern at the findings of the ATAC report and urges the government to take all necessary measures to ensure that the health of pupils and all those who work in schools is not put at risk.”

Michael Lees, a dedicated campaigner whose wife contracted mesothelioma as a teacher and died in 2000, said: “The Government’s policy of managing asbestos in schools has failed, for this report is but further evidence of the appalling standards of asbestos managements in many schools. It is unacceptable that in the twenty first century a civilised society has failed to implement measures that protect the most vulnerable people in that society - our children.”

Ends

Notes:

1. At least 178 school teachers have died from mesothelioma – one of the most aggressive forms of cancer, which is linked to asbestos exposure. More than 14,000 schools were built between the 1940s and 1980s when asbestos was routinely used in ceilings, wall linings and pipe lagging. For background referenced information visit www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk
2. ATAC is the leading association of asbestos testing and consultancy firms in the UK.
3. The Asbestos in Schools group is chaired by Paul Rowen MP. It has cross party support in the House of Commons. It is also endorsed by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Occupational Safety and Health. The group consists of all the teaching unions, the support staff unions, industry experts and long term campaigners.
4. For more information on the HSE questionnaire of 2009, which resulted in 34 local authorities being investigated by HSE inspectors, see [Determining the scale of the problem in System Built Schools](#)
5. A recent survey by Voice also found that a significant number of its members had not been given asbestos training or told whether there was asbestos in their schools.